

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

DIGITAL MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH: STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES,  
AND OPPORTUNITIES

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Willie Charles Howard Garrett

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

March 26, 2024

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative phenomenological study explores how churchgoers and senior pastors who are servant-leaders perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches as they attempt to develop healthy virtual relationships that maintain personal connections. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a change in churchgoers attending services in person. The government instituted social distancing and closures of businesses, schools, and churches. As a result, senior pastors engaged in creative ways using digital ministry to continue spreading the Word of God. While digital ministry existed pre-COVID-19, an increase occurred in response to the need to suspend in-person attendance. The theory guiding this study is the servant-leadership theory introduced by theorist Robert K. Greenleaf. In this study, the researcher defines digital ministry as using technological means for church ministry, including streaming services, social media, blogs, text, emails, telecommunications (video calling), and church websites.

Keywords: digital ministry, churchgoers, servant-leader, senior pastor, and technology.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved mother, Anita Jean Garrett Lawson. She was unwavering in her love for my brothers and me, tirelessly working multiple jobs to provide for us. A resilient African American Queen, she instilled in us the importance of a relationship with Jesus Christ. My mother passed away in August 2008 after sharing her pride in me and my future. Mom, I did it! I am continuing to make you proud. I also dedicate this dissertation to my guardian angels, my father, Willie Howard, Grandma Howard, and Auntie Regina; I miss you all. To my Chief Intercessor, the late Lisa Boose, whose unwavering support, frequent check-ins on my progress, and daily prayers uplifted me throughout this journey. Your unique dedication and encouragement are truly irreplaceable. Rest well, my friend.

Lastly, I dedicate this to Aye'Jae Garrett, my beloved four-legged companion, who was unwavering throughout this journey. He provided comfort in times of need, followed me around the house, and only requested a doggie biscuit once or twice each day I sat down to study. My heartbeat, my shadow, my son, my baby, your absence is deeply felt and cherished.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID–19)

English Standard Version (ESV)

Informed Consent (IC)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Research Questions (RQ)

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT)

## CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

### Introduction

Globally, at the end of 2019, a global pandemic unexpectedly and quickly crossed this nation, causing a crisis. The disease expanded across 200 countries; six million cases were identified. The disease attacks the respiratory system of individuals mildly, moderately, or severely. The world learned about this disease as coronavirus, coined as COVID-19 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, resulting in many deaths. The disease was highly contagious, and the death count exceeded 370,000 deaths in the year 2020 (Cuartas-Arias, 2020). In March, the then President of the United States declared a presidential emergency, and the disease was categorized as a pandemic. This pandemic notably threw the world into disarray and turned normal day-to-day activities upside down. The pandemic spread caused a lockdown, and social distancing limited physical social interaction (Naidoo et al., 2021).

Lifestyles were changed, and the country's disease stagnated in what was considered a standard way of living. As a decision of safety measures, in response to the spread of the pandemic, with the social distancing guidance established across the country, senior pastors were left with making decisions that would be effective and efficient for churches to continue spreading the Word of God. Many senior pastors instituted or enhanced digital media to continue spiritual formation in their Sunday morning worship and mid-week services. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Periscope, and YouTube, became an option for attending morning worship services online rather than in-person worship. Digital technology, such as Zoom, WebEx, Teleconferencing, and Video Teleconference, was the everyday use of technology.



According to Huang et al. (2021), with any variation of technology, there is a process that lasts the life of the idea, from the initial thought to the production. Technology was needed as an option to spread the Word of God. Lifeway's March 2020 research showed that only 8% of Protestant pastors had not offered any video sermons or online services. That percentage decreased to 3% for the following month (Earls, 2021). The online Christian community continues to evolve. This opportunity to view church services online gives viewers many choices across the country. The accessibility of church services has increased, and technology has been used to amplify God's Word within the Christian community while allowing those outside to join. Technology has allowed people to attend worship services no matter where they may be geographically. This can be beneficial for those who may not have the means to get to a physical location or may be detrimental to the survival of the church building.

For those who care about digital age ministry, there is a need to train and participate in learning new networks (Panzer, 2020). Pastors who embrace the digital age in ministry must be informed and remain current with the flow and change of technology. Linking with each other provides an opportunity to learn from one another by sharing lived experiences.

Life changes never cease to happen. Changes come about in various forms, both expected and unexpected. The pandemic caused unexpected changes that were not recognizable, but there was a need to adjust lifestyles. Businesses, corporations, schools, institutions of higher learning, and churches found themselves meeting on how to adapt to the changes while overcoming existing challenges. Changing has the potential to be challenging, but one can if an individual is willing to do so and tries to adapt. Possessing the ability to adapt to changes is critical to growing personally. Most individuals not only dislike experiencing change but also have resistance because of the unfamiliar (Long, 2020). While change may cause discomfort, fear of the

unknown, anxiety, and intimidation, as Christians, the Word of God states, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (English Standard Version<sup>1</sup>, 2023, Philippians 4:13).

Staffing, expertise, finances, and willingness from churchgoers to receive digital ministry are critical to be effective and may not be consistent across all churches. This qualitative phenomenological study explores how senior pastors and churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches as they attempt to develop healthy virtual relationships that maintain personal connections. Digital ministry is on the rise. Chapter One of this research will provide the background to the problem, the statement of the problem, the purpose statement, the research questions to be used, assumptions, and delimitations of the research. It will also define terms, provide the significance of the study, and summarize the design used in the analysis.

### **Background to the Problem**

The Holy Bible provides a clear purpose for those whom He has called to lead His people, “And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (ESV, 2023, Ephesians 4:11-12). The call to the ministry is essential. Those called are responsible for preaching the Word of God and overseers of God’s flock. These individuals are also known as Shepherds. Jesus describes Himself in John 10 as a shepherd who watches over His flock and is gentle to the lambs, carrying them to His bosom. Jesus uses the shepherd reference to illustrate how those called should lead.

In the Holy Bible, Luke 15 shows that shepherds go after lost sheep. As senior pastors, the responsibility is shepherding the flock in the ministry and spreading the Word of God. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Bible are from the English Standard Version (2023).

wake of the pandemic, there was a need to continue spreading the Good News using a different platform. The COVID-19 pandemic brought not only health challenges but also challenges with the continuation of in-person contact in the church, schools, businesses, and households. The governmental and self-imposed policies and procedures caused a pivot in socialization. These policies and practices caused social distancing to minimize the large number of people who could be affected by the spread of the virus. Both Pedersen and Favero (2020) mention that other containment measures like hand hygiene, widespread testing, and social distancing were vital to reducing excessive demands on intensive health care services (p. 805).

Social distancing and the need to safeguard the physical health of others did not stop the importance of senior pastors equipping the saints for ministry and building the spiritual community. Equipping the saints to work in the ministry is the most critical and overall mission for senior pastors and leaders of the Church. Training new and continuing believers is a priority. Second Timothy 3:16 states that God inspires the Holy Scripture and is to be taught so that Believers may be corrected and trained in righteousness. The Word of God should not only be taught, but senior pastors should guide those in the ministry to practice what has been learned daily. To be equipped means one keeps the teaching of the leader on their mind as they imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7). It also means that the redeemed sinners who are growing spiritually in the likeness of Christ and the grace of God keep them focused on the purpose of the church, building themselves in love (Ephesians 2:20-22; 4:16).

However, due to social distancing, this could not be done the way churches typically held worship services where there was in-person attendance. Churches have increased their use of technology, including having church worship services online. Nieuwhof (2020) writes, “Many churches have gone online for the first time, and everyone has made digital their default”

(Nieuwhof, 2020, para 6). This shift to online worship services has not only allowed churchgoers to continue morning services and other activities. Still, it has also opened a chance for churches to reach individuals who may not have been able to attend for several reasons (geographical location, sickness, lack of transportation, etc.).

The use of technology and its effectiveness are based on the end user. Technology use is not new to church services and plays a vital role. Nickel (2019) mentions, “the link between ministry and technology is not immediately obvious” (para 1). Technology is incorporated into society daily. From the alarm clock that sounds in the morning to the smartphone used throughout the day to the lights we turn off before sleeping at night. In the church, technology is found in the software used by the administration office, the church website, and the church app downloaded on smartphones. Technology is needed to reach as many people as possible, not only in-person but virtually as well.

The Holy Scripture is clear when it speaks to spreading the Word of God. Matthew 28:16-20 speaks about the eleven disciples and going to the mountain as instructed by Jesus.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age (ESV, 2023, Matthew 28:16-20).

When you look across the churches, you will find that digital ministry is used to spread the Word of God to the nations. Churches should be efficient and effective with this portion of their ministry. Effectiveness is critical, and ministries should successfully produce a product that represents excellence. Christians work heartily for the Lord and not to please men because the Lord will give the inheritance as a reward (Colossians 3:23-24). No matter the size of the ministry, churches were left with choosing how to maintain their congregation's spiritual

maturity effectively. With digital ministry, churches may be influential, somewhat practical, ineffective, or not have a digital ministry as a part of the church.

Jones (2021) mentions that the 2020 church membership dropped below 50% for the first time in an 80-year trend recorded by Gallup. With the declining numbers, the pandemic created more concern about membership and worship service attendance. Digital ministry is just one of several options to continue with worship services and share God's Word.

While many churches can afford to digitalize their ministry, some churches may not be able to do so. Myong (2021) wrote that pastors who identify themselves as African Americans were three times more likely to indicate that when it came to the pandemic, they either reduced staff, reduced pay, and benefits, or eliminated positions compared to other Protestant pastors. Small churches may or may not have the financial resources or individuals fluent in digital technology. Myong (2021) notes that mandates for the closure of establishments because of the spread of the virus certainly affected membership growth and worship service attendance. When membership growth declines and in-person attendance decreases, finances also drop.

Although this need to move to digital ministry has increased, some church leaders are not fluent in digital technology, which poses a challenge. According to Panzer (2020), 50% of the churches surveyed did not have a website. He noted a gap in the skills needed to be an expert in digital ministry. This lack of skills and the overwhelming need to develop new technologies rapidly only exacerbated the challenges of effectively implementing effective digital ministry in the church.

The digital ministry allowed people to attend church in person or participate from a remote location. However, in-person worship services were postponed until further notice during the pandemic. This writer found that a problem came with some individuals in the church. Some

churchgoers did not have a computer or the technology to attend virtual worship, they were not tech-savvy enough to connect to platforms like Zoom, Periscope, TEAMS, etc., and others preferred in-person over virtual because Sundays and mid-week services were the days they could not only learn about God but to also fellowship and connect with other individuals.

While the message of God was being delivered to both in-person and virtual churchgoers, the problem was that it was one of the only options to comply with social distancing mandates and the safety of both the churchgoers and the pastor. What the church failed to do was to ensure that all were technologically savvy. The church was equipped with a computer room. Still, it did not incorporate training sessions to ensure those who could not access the digital platforms learned how to log on to the internet world—more effort needed to be put into instituting effective digital ministry strategies so spiritual formation could continue. The church, in general, now faced the dilemma of going fully digital; the church lacked the expertise to provide a digital platform that would include all aspects of the ministry. The church continued to share vital information through emails and text messaging. Having regular service and children's ministry at the same time was challenging. The church suffered financially due to difficulties using apps that allowed giving electronically or trusting the security of accessing bank accounts. While digital ministry is one way to spread the Word of God outside the church, Panzer (2020) notes that the church's goal should not incorporate all new technology. The goal for senior pastors is to study the culture of digital ministry and find ways that it can overlap the mission and vision of the church. Meeting the vision is essential, for without it perishes (Proverbs 29:18).

Digital ministry is not of the past; it is used more now than in the past. It is a form of communication that has become widespread. Churches have become more interested in internet use, as evidenced by their increased media presence on social platforms. The proclamation of the

Word of God is communication, and it requires careful and strategic planning to ensure its efficiency and effectiveness. There is a growing number of dioceses, religious congregations, parishes, church organizations, and programs using the Internet to reach out to interested people. The need for senior pastors to rely on digital ministry and other church software has increased pre-COVID-19, and more so now that the pandemic has lessened in the country. Digital ministry is expected to be more than before and is the conduit to connecting the spiritual community outside the four walls of the church building. The church buildings closed because of the implemented social distancing mandate, but the Church did not close. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 that His Church is built on a rock, and even Hell will not come against it.

Digital tools are essential for spiritual formation and are extended to those outside the usual circle of people. Reaching out to the lost to compel them to convert to the teachings of Christ is the goal. This reaching out is done through digital ministry, and some refer individuals doing so to practicing digital discipleship. Discipleship through digital technology is more than posting a Scripture. It could also include but is not limited to posting worship services, personal testimonies, and inspirational messages. A strategically planned digital ministry will be more effective for those who tune in.

While digital ministry is not new, it is new to some churches and churchgoers. Digital ministry expands across all aspects of the church. Digital ministry stretches beyond morning worship service. It can incorporate education, Bible study, prayer meetings, training, and pastoral counseling. As a direct result of the pandemic, this researcher was among many church leaders who had to decide how to continue spreading the Gospel while keeping the believers safe. Historically, this ministry recorded live services and posted them on various social media platforms the same day. However, temporarily closing the doors made it impossible for the

churchgoers to participate in in-person live recordings. Ultimately, it was decided to expand the digital ministry to make church services interactive during live recording. Options to continue with the spread of the gospel were explored. However, it came at an unexpected and unplanned cost to the ministry.

Local leaders were facing the same dilemma. They were left to get the message out to their congregation and community. Church leaders were faced with continuing spiritual formation through digital ministry and keeping the churchgoers spiritually and socially connected. Many churches use social media platforms to engage with their churchgoers, sharing inspirational messages, Bible verses, quotes of the day, and prayer requests. Digital ministry was not only a necessity during the pandemic but has become a valuable tool to reach those not physically present at the church.

Effective digital ministry not only aids in the spiritual formation of current churchgoers but also, according to Barna Group (2020), “some churched adults see online worship as an opportunity to try other services themselves, some also see it as a chance to invite friends—whether Christian (22%) or non-Christian (14%)—to “visit” their churches online” (Barna, 2020, para 6). These accepted invites will introduce Christ to non-Christians in hopes they become saved. The digital ministry can offer a worship service experience for those who regularly attend and those who would choose not to participate in any church building structure.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With the pandemic, church leaders had the responsibility to safeguard their followers. Church leaders temporarily closed their doors and moved in-person worship services to virtual worship. A survey by the Pew Research Center in April 2020 found that ninety-one percent of churches closed their worship services (Gecewicz, 2020). While many churches pivoted to online



worship services, there was little thought on their effectiveness and whether they would engage new followers in the virtual space (Kontan, 2021). While digital ministry is not a new avenue to spread the Word of God, there was an increase as the country faced this new and unknown pandemic. However, a community of believers joining only virtually can challenge Christian leadership and may cause hindrances to spiritual formation and growth. Making attempts to keep the entire membership engaged adds to the challenges. Not all ministries were fully prepared for the pandemic, and the mandate to close the church doors interrupted the usual way of worshipping and spreading the Word of God. Despite the challenges, there were some advantages, allowing individuals to join worship service from the comfort of their homes and surfing the internet for other worship services. Since the uptick of online worship services is present, this is the time to strategically plan for incorporating effective digital ministry in the church. Effective implementation of digital ministry will intentionally welcome relational connections and opportunities for Christian formation (Kontan, 2021).

Shifting a ministry to an online platform falls within the digital church. Lowe and Lowe (2018) stated, “Growing together online requires the interdependence and interaction between the self and the communities in which one lives, serves, and learns” (p. 71). Before the onset of the pandemic, the online community included those familiar with and accepted worshipping online. However, those unfamiliar with online worship services could challenge some ministry members. “Among the growing numbers of Americans using the Internet, many of them are turning to the digital dimension to get in touch with God and pursue matters of faith” (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 71).

Keeping Believers engaged is another significant problem when moving worship services online or on other digital platforms. Senior Pastors should be strategic when moving all things

within the church to digital ministry. Churchgoers who anticipate, look forward to, and, in some cases, need the social aspects that in-person worship brings may need to help to acclimate to this way of attending worship service. Churchgoers who once chose to participate in worship services physically but could not do so because of the mandate to close the church structure doors now become consumers rather than partners. When Churchgoers are physically present, they can be heard and seen as included in the worship service. That changed with moving services entirely online.

Closing the church's doors stopped socialization and those accustomed to worshipping in a building rather than watching a screen. Mainly, you find challenges with African Americans because of their custom of using the church as a meeting place. Banks (2020) says that in addition to challenges with accessing the internet and technical abilities with some congregations, African Americans scrambled to continue with what is a crucial connection to their places of worship.

The COVID-19 pandemic made a significant change to the way church services were once held. This pandemic was not a repeat of other pandemics, so research on this pandemic and the fallout it caused is limited. Any contribution to senior pastors and churchgoers implementing effective digital ministry to learn of its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities is beneficial to gauge ways to spread the Word of God, even if Believers stay home. Little research provides the best strategies for senior pastors to use, considering socialization, inclusiveness, the finances of the church, and spiritual formation and growth. Lowe and Lowe (2018) stated, "One of the most frequent criticisms of online theological education is the supposed inferior status of mediated presence compared to the assumed influence of embodied presence made possible only when

persons physically gather with one another” (p. 72). For senior pastors, effective digital ministry strategies must be in place to continue successfully spreading the Gospel.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore through research how senior pastors who are servant-leaders, and their churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches as they attempt to develop healthy virtual relationships that maintain personal connections. In research, Barna Group (2020) noted that seventy-three percent of pastors indicated their church doors were closed during the pandemic. While thirty-eight percent of the groups stopped meeting altogether, fifty-three percent turned to digital tools to remain connected with each other and the ministry. This research defines digital ministry as using technological means for church ministry, including streaming services, social media, blogs, texts and emails, telecommunications (video calling), and church websites. This phenomenological study follows the Greenleaf’s (1977) servant-leadership theory.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative phenomenology study focused on exploring and gathering insightful answers to four key research questions supporting the essence of human experiences. The questions helped form the themes from the participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and actions because of engaging in digital ministry. The research questions delved into the lived experiences of shifting to digital platforms and looked at the challenges and implications of this type of transformation. The research aims to understand the lived experiences and unfold the impact of digital ministry on churchgoers and leaders alike.

The first research question sought to understand the types of digital ministries implemented in their churches. It allowed the participants to say if the digital ministry's implementation and use were effective. The second question frames up the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the traditional in-person ministry and the digital ministries used by the senior pastor and the churchgoers. The third question explores any intentions of the senior pastors to expand the digital ministry. The question also allowed the senior pastors to expound on any obstacles hindering its expansion. Developing any relationship has its challenges, and the last question delves into the senior pastors' experience with developing healthy relationships in the virtual space. Digital ministry of any type can be considered impersonal because it does not involve traditional face-to-face interactions within the church.

The following research questions set up the foundational framework for this phenomenological study:

**RQ1.** What forms of digital ministry have senior pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective?

**RQ2.** What do senior pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry?

**RQ3.** Do senior pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion?

**RQ4.** How do senior pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction?

Barna Group (2020) researched and determined an increase in attendance at the onset of the pandemic and moving to online worship services. When churches were mandated to close, over half of the attendees moved to digital technology to stay connected. This move to digital platforms was challenging. This research reveals the importance of the dynamics of digital

ministry and the need for churches to implement strategy and effectiveness to keep engaged churchgoers in the digital age.

From a known experience, this researcher found a massive disconnect between the senior population in a local church and the younger churchgoers. The church sent instructions via email addresses on record and mailed hard copies to the aging population. The church later found that it was not just the senior population but others who were not technically savvy. This was evident when the church-hosted studies, known to most as Bible Study, were on a Zoom platform, and the initial usage was unproductive as more time was given to downloading the app and accessing it rather than teaching during the pandemic.

Kuoppamaki, Taipale, and Wilska (2017) noted an increasing worldwide interest in older adults who access digital technologies as the use of mobile technology has grown. Only a tiny percentage of the churchgoers in this local church were individuals who did not have access to technical devices because they could not afford the purchase. Access to digital resources in the inner city is challenging because of limited access to personal computers or no internet service.

During the pandemic, libraries were also closed. So, churchgoers who accessed the internet at the library could no longer do so and, therefore, could not join or experience online worship services. For those using cellular telephones, data charges were not feasible for some churchgoers. Seeing the need, the local church partnered with a third-party entity willing to donate two dozen computers to the church. Once the computers were received, the youth in the church assisted with downloading the necessary applications that would provide an opportunity to access the Church Zoom meetings and Sunday morning services. The nonprofit organization purchased internet services through MiFi devices. This was possible not only through the

generosity of the third-party vendor but also because the church is small in membership; those who needed it were given laptop computers.

Digital ministry can be easy if the right people are a part of the operations. This researcher's experience through observation that while individuals enjoyed operating the camera and posting on social media, there was more to digital ministry, and it would benefit the church to engage with technically savvy individuals. Different platforms can be used, but the senior pastor must decide what is best for the ministry they lead. Spiritual formation is the primary purpose, and the church's motto centers around everything in the ministry being done in the spirit of excellence. Therefore, there must be a well-rounded digital ministry that will include all age groups in the church. Panzer (2018) critically observes that a church does not have an effective digital ministry because it posts on websites and social media. He notes that effective digital ministry gathers around the Word of God in a digital space.

Lastly, from experience, getting some churchgoers comfortable with worshipping at home and not in the church building is a known challenge. It was more prevalent in those who were socially active in the church. The senior members shared that they have faithfully attended Sunday church services throughout their entire lives. Closing the church doors had posed challenges for them, disrupting their spiritual routine of participating in in-person worship services. It altered how Holy Communion Sundays were held virtually rather than in person, and deacons were no longer allowed to take Holy Communion with the sick and shut in. Due to social distancing, one could only endure and drop off Holy Communion.

## Assumptions and Delimitations

### Research Assumptions

This is a qualitative phenomenological study; Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019) indicate that we learn from other's experiences, but a wiser decision may be made if placed in the same situation. "We assume the subjective experience of an individual is not as reliably informative as objective data collected from external reality" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 90). The researcher of this study has the following assumptions:

1. The researcher assumes that some churches lack effective digital ministry because they are less technically savvy and unable to afford appropriate equipment.
2. The researcher assumes that senior pastors face challenges with churchgoers who are less fortunate to have adequate equipment to participate fully in worship services in the virtual world.
3. The researcher assumes that in-person attendance is declining and the loss of being physically present hinders socialization.
4. Lastly, the researcher assumes that churchgoers have a different spiritual experience than they would in person.

There have been studies on online churches. Senior pastors have implemented online service pre-COVID to remain relevant and attempt to maintain participation by younger members and young families. Online services also open opportunities for membership growth. Hutchings (2017) mentions four consistent topics when studying online churches: the relationship between online and offline churchgoing, the validity of online community, the form and efficacy of online rituals, and the design of virtual architecture and sacred space. He also lists a fifth topic that should be considered: the impact of digital media on religious authority, which has great relevance for online churches but has been discussed primarily within other areas of the study of digital religion (p. 24). Senior pastors must be abreast of challenges the ministry and its churchgoers may face.

### **Delimitations of the Research Design**

This qualitative phenomenological study had limitations. The study was limited to senior pastors of small churches, with membership numbers ranging from 15 to no more than 150 in Ohio and Michigan. The study was limited to ten churches that have implemented and have an active digital ministry since 2019. As it relates to senior pastors, they must have been in the position for three or more years at the current church. The years are selected to include experiences pre-COVID and at the same church.

While an invitation was sent to various churches, the pastors who responded to participate in the research were from the African American community; the research was more focused on its demographics and not on its culture. Therefore, the study is not limited to this community's cultural experiences. Despite this, the research provides valuable insight into the phenomenon of digital ministry and shows the challenges and opportunities that any denomination and cultural background can face. This research highlights the experiences of the African American senior pastors but certainly can include other cultural backgrounds in further search.

The study also included churchgoers, identified as those who regularly attend church at least one day within three weeks of the month. The churchgoer must have participated in the church before, during, and after the pandemic. It was not extended to churchgoers who may visit the selected church during the research period. The senior pastor of that church must be a participant if churchgoers are going to participate. The research did not extend to any additional church officers, but they could be identified as churchgoers.

The research limited itself to the living experiences of those who attended in-person or virtual Sunday morning services. It did not factor on any occasion with attending the church.



Various human-made and natural disasters were not considered, such as coastal storms, fires, droughts, floods, earthquakes, dam/levee breaks, etc. However, this study focused exclusively on the most recent COVID-19 outbreak.

The duration of this research spanned from January 2019 to October 2023. Doing so provided a timeframe to examine the implementation of digital ministries before, during, and after the pandemic. This timeframe allowed for long-term effects of digital ministry over four years, allowing more data to be collected from the participants. Senior pastors offered valuable insights into this growing digital ministry space and the impact on those who are in-person and virtual churchgoers.

### **Definition of Terms**

The terms below are those which are more relevant to the topic of study.

1. *Disciple*: “Disciples of Christ are persons of obedience even when those around them encourage another path” (Anderson & Skinner, 2019, p. 67)
2. *Digital culture*: “The means of communication, everyday activities, creative expressions online” (Finlayson et al., 2022, p. 42).
3. *Digital Technology*: “A technique or tool that enhances the individual power to manipulate one’s environment” (Kok, 2018, p. 1).
4. *Servant-leader*: “A mindset that embraces the philosophy of servant first” (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2018, p. 4).
5. *Digital Strategy*: “The art of making clear and distinctive choices that define where you will allocate scarce resources” (Bones et al., 2019. p. 10).
6. *Digital Ministry*: A tech-related task that allows one to go beyond the organization, connecting people through technology and communicating effectively so that all systems can operate smoothly. (Gossett, 2017).

### **Significance of the Study**

Digital technology is not new to the Church, Gault (2020) stated, “In the contemporary Black Church, digital technology is present, though innominate force. Social media, electronic

and audio devices (i.e., eBooks, podcasts, streaming devices), and software represent digital technologies commonly used in Black Church life (Gault, 2020, p. 3). To assist with virtual worship services through the digital ministry, the Black Church uses other equipment that takes the place of an individual who is there in person. Gault speaks to this in the article by asking, “Do technological innovations like Whoop Triggerz, an application that allows users to provide musical support to preachers and singers, disrupt or preserve the black homiletic tradition?” (Gault, 2020, p. 4). This research study and its findings encompass digital ministry within the Church; however, it did not seek to incorporate the Black Church expressly.

Spiritual technologies have been around in the Black Church. “Arguably, the story of Nat Turner is first among them. Nat Turner’s confession reveals the longstanding role of spiritual technologies (i.e., signs, miracles, and other forms of divine communication) in building new religious networks for Black liberation among diverse Black and gendered bodies operating at the margins of Christian acceptability” (Gault, 2020, pp. 5-6). “A new survey from Pew Research Center shows that while 92% of evangelical Christians and 86% of mainline Protestants say their church offers streaming or recorded services online, only 73% of Protestant worshippers in the historically black tradition say they can watch religious services remotely” (Gecewicz, 2020, para 24).

However, Banks (2020) indicates that one church did not have computers or home access to the Internet. This is a factor in other churches and communities as well. Everyone cannot afford a computer and internet access, so virtual worship services would be complex. The research paper addressed small churches and determined if this is prevalent among those who choose to participate. As a result of only the Black Church responding, Banks (2020) acknowledges that African American churchgoers scramble to stay connected virtually.

A Barna Group (2021) states that the mandates of the pandemic impacted this demographic, and leaders were left with no other option but to move into digital ministry to continue with weekly services. For some senior pastors, this pivot was the first time. This study discusses the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. Although this research did not collect data specifically about the possible threats that may arise with digital ministry, it provides insight into potential safeguards for senior pastors, churchgoers, and churches alike.

Drs. Lowe and Lowe (2018) state, “Distance is no barrier to the work of the Holy Spirit among the community of saints since their fellowship is a spiritual one not determined by physical proximity” (p. 74). Senior pastors must embrace the internet and social networks to share the Good News to effectively get the Word of God out to believers and non-believers. This underscores the importance of digital platforms in spreading the Word of God. Indeed, the internet and social media have become integral parts of modern communication, and some churches are not shying away from implementing such in their ministry. Using these platforms could reach a wider audience, have access to resources digitally, and foster a stronger spiritual community.

Spiritual formation must continue among senior pastors and churchgoers as they are essential to spiritual growth. The digital ministry provides options to accomplish the mission. Digital ministry through technology is vital and should be considered so that the church is prepared for the next pandemic that may arise and cause the church’s doors to close.

### **Summary of the Design**

This qualitative research study used interview questions that were through video technology. Video conferencing allowed the researcher to gauge non-verbal communication. The questions were established using articles, journals, and or books. The questions were open-

ended, with no time restraints on responses. The interviewees were both senior pastors of the church as well as churchgoers. The objective was to research the implementation of digital ministry and its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities.

As mentioned, information was gathered from small churches with a membership of 15 but no more than 150. With the option to interview through video conferencing, churches outside the local area were considered and participated. However, the church, whether local or outside the local area, falls within the small church category and cannot exceed 150 regular churchgoers. This approach allowed for a diverse range of perspectives capturing the lived experiences of small churches. With this focus, the research was able to provide data that may not have been the result of larger churches. The video conferencing gave way to greater accessibility and convenience for participation, making it easier to include churches outside the researcher's geographical location.

All names of senior pastors and churchgoers were withheld as a research requirement. Disclaimers were with all parties at the start of the interview, and after hearing the release, the interviewee had the liberty to discontinue the interview process. This confidentiality ensured the privacy and anonymity of participants. By omitting their names, it also helped protect the reputations and identities of individuals and their churches. The research was able to gather the experiences of senior pastors and churchgoers without compromising the trust and privacy of participants.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope. (ESV, 2023, Romans 15:4).*

### Overview

Spiritual formation is the essence of the Christian Community. The church is intended to carry out the mission set by Christ for this world. Wilhoit and Willard (2022) look at Christian spiritual formation as a path that allows one to flourish as they are in Christ Jesus; it is how those weary and overloaded rest. Spiritual formation is the center of the purpose of the Christian community. The Christian Community, by analogy, is like a seedbed. A seedbed, or rather a seeding bed, is a specified space where the environment is conducive to growing planted seeds. Within the environment, you will find raised beds that are framed.

Most notably, in this seedbed, you will find soil. This is a controlled space where select individuals work diligently to nurture the seedlings in anticipation of transplanting the seeds in large fields or gardens. Farm workers or gardeners till these fields and gardens. Different types of tools are used, from hand tools to large rotary tillers, to accommodate the size of the land.

The same is found in the Christian Community. The ongoing purpose, as with the seedbed, is to grow. Individuals in this community grow spiritually. In Matthew 13 and again in Luke 8, Jesus shares the short story about individuals planting seeds in four different types of soils. The four were rocky, rugged, thorny, and sound. Sowing in the Christian community is critical, and the Sower must know those variables that can damage the soil. Senior Pastors are responsible for seeding good seeds in good soil in this community of Believers. In Mark 4:20, he says those who sow in good soil are the ones who hear and accept the Word. Those who do will have the evidence of bearing fruit in an increase of thirty, sixty, one hundred times more.

The Apostle Paul states, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (ESV, 2023, II Corinthians 3:18). This scripture is supporting the responsibility of senior pastors and other church leaders who aim to enhance spiritual formation within the community of Believers. Earley (2018) shares that the goal of transformation in the Christian community is for individuals to grow to reflect the image of Jesus Christ (p. 14).

Paul also writes,

Until we all attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather than speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him, who is the head, into Christ (ESV, 2023, Eph 4:13-15).

When looking at the church's intent, individuals grow towards unification in the faith and knowing Jesus Christ (Mbennah, 2016). One way to accomplish this is to have Servants of God go out and urge others to come and fill the house to learn the origins of Jesus Christ: His birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension to sit at the right Hand of God (Luke 14:23). This in line with the Great Commission, where Jesus instructed His followers to go out and make disciples (Matthew 28:19). Through online sermons and Bible studies, it provides an opportunity to learn about Jesus and grow.

For example, individuals can foster spiritual growth through participation in worship services at a church, temple, or synagogue. Within this setting, one can typically engage in Bible study, Sunday School, worship services, and social interaction with both fellow Believers and those who may attend but do not share a belief in God. However, the world faced an unknown pandemic that ultimately caused social distancing and the closure of businesses, schools,

restaurants, and churches. The governmental-enforced closure manufactured challenges for individuals who wanted to attend church within the physical building or the traditional brick-and-mortar setting.

Wang and Elhage (2022) noted that in 2020, an average of 220 individuals attended worship services every week. However, two years later, the average had declined to 150 individuals weekly. The need to enhance spiritual formation within the Christian community was still present. Since individuals were not attending services in person, the need for digital ministry grew increasingly apparent as the option to continue spreading the Word of God. The increased utilization of digital technology allows churches to continue maturing the Christian community. However, as Nieuwhof (2020) mentions, digital ministry in online church services undoubtedly has pros and cons. While digital ministry serves the purpose of spiritual growth, it could cause a decline in the church's in-person attendance.

There is an uptick in using technology to share the Word of God online and through other applications. Chapter Two investigates the theological and theoretical frameworks that shaped this study. In addition, the researcher provides additional literature related to other scholars who have contributed to this area of study. The chapter continues with information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rationale for the study, the gap in the literature, and the study profile will be presented toward the end of the chapter. This study identifies strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities when implementing digital ministry in the church.

### **Theological Framework for the Study**

This study section is informed by Ryrie's (1999) beliefs, which mention that theology is for all and that everyone should strive to become a theologian. According to Ryrie, one can engage with theology by comprehending and explaining it through exegesis and systematization.

Using the Holy Bible as the source of the Christian faith, theology is the “discovery, systematizing, and presentation of the truths about God” (Ryrie, 1999, pp. 5-6).

The researcher identified some principles related to the research topic to establish a theological framework. The use of theological writings, scholarly literature, and the Holy Bible helped form this section of the dissertation. The researcher was aware that interpretations and theological perspectives could influence the implications of the research. The principles guided this portion of the dissertation.

The researcher intentionally used the Holy Bible's English Standard Version (ESV). The researcher uses the same version with other studies when prepping for sermons. The researcher understands that the ESV is a translation that stays true to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts, and this version makes it easier to understand the context of the Scripture. The ESV is highly popular among researchers looking to provide a closer and more precise look at the theological study. Leland Ryken (2011) is an expert who sought to bring readers closer to biblical authors' original work through English Bible translations (p. 35). Ryken was involved in the literary creation of the English Standard Version of the Bible. His involvement helped to shape the language and style.

This chapter incorporates various subsections, including the servant-leadership of Jesus Christ, servant-leadership, the role of the pastor, the church, the church community, the online church community, digital communication, the online church, digital pastor, and digital leadership. In addition, the chapter aims to provide a guide to the roles and responsibilities of those who were interviewed and explain the communities this research involved.



## **Servant-leadership of Jesus Christ**

If an example of a perfect servant-leader is needed, Jesus Christ embodies all the characteristics of a servant-leader mirror. Before examining how Jesus exemplified the true essence of a servant-leader, let us look at the importance. Servant-leadership encompasses the ethical norms and principles needed as you interact with one another. Servant-leadership is a significant model theologically, socially, and culturally. Servant-leaders can foster a bond and loyalty between the followers and the one whom they follow. When done correctly, followers tend to invest more in the purpose and mission of a church.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, walked here on earth on assignment by God (John 1:14) but did so with humility and a servant's heart. Jesus Christ described himself as a servant in the Book of Mark 10:45, where He said he came to earth to serve and not be served. Jesus Christ was the epitome of a servant-leader, displaying the act of a servant, making for a great model for servanthood. The Holy Scriptures teach that all are called to be servants.

In the Book of Deuteronomy 34:5, Moses was called a servant of God and led with servitude until he departed. Hwa (2021) writes, "The New Testament is that we are called to servanthood and not to positional leadership and dominance" (p. 20). Jesus Christ has the power to do and perform anything He desires, but He shows that leading by attitude is expected rather than by skills or position. Jesus and the disciples were in the upper room in John 13:1-2, and it was customary to have a servant wash their feet, but he was not there. None of the disciples volunteered but argued. Jesus responded by taking a basin of water and a towel and began to wash His disciples' feet after dinner. Jesus explained the meaning of foot washing to the disciples in John 13:12, 15, and that no position prohibits one from serving someone else. They

forgot to schedule the servant who would have washed their feet. Instead, the Son of the Living God did.

Jesus shared with those who followed that there was a difference between His leadership and those leaders who were among them. Those leaders were self-serving, and their leadership styles were not of servitude (Mark 10:42-44; Matthew 20:25-28). Jesus, through His teaching, emphasized the importance of servant-leadership, as leaders are called to serve, putting others' needs before their own. Pastors and leaders of the church are called to emulate the model of leadership displayed by Christ. Being humble, compassionate, and willing to serve are just some of the characteristics needed to lead the body of Believers.

### **Servant-leadership**

Blanchard and Broadwell (2018) stated, "Servant-leadership is the only way to guarantee great relationships and results" (p. 26). The use of the word servant-leadership is not a new concept. The term was introduced and has been used since the 1970s when Robert Greenleaf (1977) authored and published "The Servant as Leader," a good servant-leader looks to be a servant rather than to be served. When leaders add to one's life rather than wanting for themselves, it builds trust and opens opportunities to grow the community they are leading. While Greenleaf (1977) did not contribute to the term servant-leadership from a biblical standpoint, he firmly believed in how Jesus ministered as an example of a servant-leader. Greenleaf's (1977) contributions to this title came from a personal place within. Boone (2018) points out that servant-leadership in any agency, enterprise, or community is not simple. While the position is not simple and comes with great responsibility, servanthood should be at the forefront while leading others.

Paul, renowned as a great leader, represents a servant-leader in Romans 1:1. This representation mirrors the teachings of Jesus Christ, who stressed servanthood, the core principle of leadership. Jesus highlights servanthood in his teaching in Matthew 23:11, stating that humility and selflessness are important qualities in a leader. Senior pastors guide and direct their followers, investing in their personal and spiritual formation. Cultivating a culture of servant-leadership is essential to the Body of Christ.

Jesus Christ's servant-leadership has been discussed by scholars like Blanchard and Broadwell (2018) and Howell (2015). Having a servant's heart is part of Christ's characteristics. Developing and practicing this skill while in the ministry builds the trust of those who follow. Possessing humility will lead servant-leaders to put others first. Servant-leaders know that it is not self that exalts them, but the Scriptures say that if you humble yourself, then the Lord will exalt you (James 4:10). Servant-leaders learn to live in harmony with those in the spiritual community and are not haughty (Romans 12:16).

As with those characters in the Bible, servant-leaders today focus on the growth of those being led. Northouse (2022) states that listening, healing, empathy, awareness, persuasion, foresight, stewardship, and commitment to people are among other characteristics that a servant-leader possesses (pp. 255-256). In the spiritual community, servant-leaders guide and ensure spiritual formation occurs with those in the community. Being a leader is not equivalent to being a servant-leader. Traditionally, leaders tend to lead by fulfilling the organization's mission. Leaders in this environment can lead without caring for those who are following. They thrive on meeting goals and objectives. Servant-leaders lead with a sense of care for those who follow and those who will come into the Body of Jesus Christ.

Compared to the servant-leader, traditional leaders will prioritize their authority and control over their followers. The servant-leader ensures that the needs of those on the team are met, and this type of leader fosters team engagement and reinforces the spirit of inclusion as the purpose is fulfilled. The servant-leader recognizes one who carries the values of a servant-leader. They are always looking for someone who can become a servant-leader.

Pastors should remember that Jesus was the actual model of a servant-leader. As servant-leaders, it is their responsibility to speak up for those who follow them, to defend them when they are right, correct them when they are wrong, to watch over the poor and those in need (Proverbs 31:9). God intended for His people to meek and humble and serve with humility. One must do so until they return to be with the Father (Ephesians 4:2). This biblical perspective on servant-leadership emphasizes humility, compassion, and selflessness. Pastors are called to be examples of Christ-like leadership, taking the lead and being shepherds caring for sheep. Pastors following the example of Jesus Christ by embracing servant-leadership can effectively lead their churchgoers through the complexities of digital ministry.

### **Role of the Pastor**

The role of the pastor is to care for the people of God. They are responsible for teaching and preaching doctrine, officiating at weddings and funerals, leading rites of passage such as baptisms, visiting the sick, counseling and comforting the churchgoers, and being a church leader. A pastor preaches the message of becoming mature in the Word of God. Not only does the pastor ensure that the believers are growing, but it is also the pastor's responsibility to grow and become spiritually mature. Pastors are anointed to proclaim the good news. Jesus says in Luke 4:18-19,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of the sight to

the blind, to set liberty for those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In this statement of Jesus, He acknowledges the Spirit and that even as the Son of God, He shows the prime example of how pastors should not only be anointed but carry out the power of God that is on the inside. The Scripture indicates that the Spirit anoints Jesus. Jesus 1) preached the good news to the poor, 2) proclaimed liberty to those held captive, 3) gave the blind their sight, and 4) provided liberty to the oppressed. This represents the heavy responsibility that lies on the shoulders of the pastor. The pastor should have and maintain a relationship with God. To enhance this relationship, the pastor should communicate with God daily (Mark 1:35). Paul lists the qualifications for those who desire office or have been called to the position. The pastor should work to be self-controlled, respectful, gentle, and faithful (I Timothy 3:2). In addition, in Titus 1:6-9, the overseer, another title for a pastor-leader, must be above reproach and a steward of God. In these verses, Paul shares what the pastor is prohibited from doing. A pastor's vital role is to preach the Word of God in the church and outside the four brick-and-mortar walls. Jesus traveled through villages and towns, teaching and preaching the Good News (Matthew 9:35).

Additionally, the pastor has the responsibility to make disciples and tend to the needs of the people. The Bible mentions that pastors were given to equip the saints to carry out the ministry's work and grow the spiritual community (Ephesians 4:11-16). As membership grows in the church, the responsibility to care for them becomes increasingly important, as all those attending the church should be cared for. This responsibility is mentioned in Acts 20:28, that close attention to self and all the flock is expected of one who is made an overseer. Not only to the people, but the Word of God also gives instructions to care for the church.

Some theologians accept that ministry is an order in the church, "ministry constitutes,

indeed, a particular class of persons, a kind of functionaries of which Jesus Christ would have his Church never deprived” (Akin & Pace, 2017, p. 46). The role of the pastor is critically important in creating an effective way to communicate to both those who attend church in person and those who choose to attend church virtually. The pastor should have the ability to evangelize. Pastors should not expect their followers to do what they cannot see. Jesus was an example, and He evangelized by example, and so should pastors. “God doesn’t expect pastors to simply coach from the sidelines. He expects every pastor to be a player-coach” (Easley & Easley, 2020, p. 55). Pastors preach and teach the Word of God to their congregations, but evangelism says you go out and share the Good News with people who do not know Jesus Christ. Pastors proclaim the Word of God so that individuals will come to know Christ for themselves (Philippians 3:10).

According to Willimon (2016), “The pastoral ministry is a gift of God to the church. It is not an easy vocation, this calling full of peril” (Willimon, 2016, p. 12). Attending virtual worship rather than in person can cause problems for those who follow. “You as a pastor faithfully exercise concern for persons in the name of Christ whether their situation is critical or not” (Oates, 1982, p. 22).

For a pastor to be successful in their position, the servant-leadership model should become a part of how they lead the congregation. Three components make up a good pastor-servant-leader. Effective servant-leaders provide and protect and are present at various levels (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2021, p. 65). The pastor should move according to those three pivotal elements when foreseen and unforeseen situations arise. Lastly, pastors can flexibly switch when a situation calls for it. First Corinthians 16:13-14, “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like me, be strong. Let all you do be done in love” (ESV, 2023).

## **Transformational Leadership**

It calls for a transformational leader to accomplish a successful change in the ministry. “A transformational leader is one who can guide, direct, and influence others to bring about a fundamental change, both externally and through internal processes” (Chancellor, 2020, p. 4). By comparison, one will find that transformational leadership lines well with the servant-leadership model. The transformational leader successfully motivates followers to move in the desired direction that is best for both the followers and the leader. Abraham was a great leader who transformed individuals around a vision. Abraham cared about people and knew the importance of having and working out a vision.

Listening is one characteristic that stands out about a transformational leader. Leaders who fall into this category set out to transform a community of people. This person can connect. Transformational leaders undoubtedly did well when dealing with the need to pivot because of the pandemic. Convincing followers not to attend the building to have church does not come easy. Trying to get the longtime faithful churchgoers who, because of the time attending service, had to stop coming physically to church and sit in their unofficial reserved seats was not only sad but unimaginable. However, transformational leaders can handle a crowd better than those not gifted with this skill.

As the Christian community takes this turn at the corner, transformational leaders are best to persuade the followers that church worship service is not like it was before. Someone will need to convince one set of followers that it is okay that they worship from home while at the same time convincing the others that coming to church is not reckless. By embracing transformational leadership, pastors and leaders in the church can effectively lead churchgoers

through challenges and opportunities that stem from digital ministry. Transformational leaders can help build a culture of unity and purpose and grow the spiritual community.

This leader must create a comfortable spot for all in the middle and then motivate them to meet there with understanding. The church's mission and God's purpose for His people must move forward. Transformational leaders will work on that common ground and then encourage others to come.

### **Spiritual Formation**

The term spiritual formation is being heard increasingly within the Christian community. It is a term, however, that is practiced but may not be coined as such in the studies of those in the church. "The term spiritual formation has a historical association with the Roman Catholic Church to denote the training of full-time ministers in both the academic arena and spiritual disciplines" (Teo, 2017, p. 139). The researcher thought it was essential to include this as one of the theological frameworks of this study. The purpose of digital ministry is to take the Message of God out to the nations. How the Message of God is being taught forms Believers spiritually.

In the spiritual formation community, the process is led by the Spirit, humankind, and those called to lead the Believers of God. Spiritual maturity is the focus of this formation. The more one is taught and learns of God's Word, the more maturity happens. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:13 that we must all attain and unify in the faith and mature when we come to the knowledge of Jesus. This is the expectation of those who are in this community.

Spiritual formation does not rest only on the leader. It is collective and corporate, but it is also individual. Believers are spiritually formed through their actions. Building a relationship with God is essential to spiritual formation (Colossians 2:7). Praying is the opportunity to



converse with God. Effective communication strengthens all relationships, heavenly or here on earth. Jesus tells us there is a need always to pray (Luke 18:1).

The Apostle Paul provides a five-part process of spiritual formation in 2 Corinthians 3:18 when he writes, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is a Spirit” (ESV, 2023). The five steps, as noted by Tang (2014, p. 79), are:

1. Believers will be transformed into the likeness of Christ.
2. The transformation process is an ongoing, lifelong process.
3. It is Trinitarian.
4. The Holy Spirit is involved in the transformation process.
5. God’s glory is restored when the above takes place.

### **Role of the Church**

Previously, in this chapter, this researcher shared definitions of theology from two theorists. This section provides another description and ties it to the church. The theology of the Church, “Theology is the discipline of speaking words about God. Simply put, theology is God talk” (Dockery, 2017, p. 12). The Church is where the Word of God is proclaimed and provides a space for the church community and those desiring to join it to come together, learn, and fellowship. According to Journet (2015), “The Church is a reality in the world. She makes herself accessible to all, but not all know her” (p. 29). The Church is where the walkers of faith gather for spiritual formation through the church's leader, often known as the pastor. The Book of Hebrews 10:25, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (ESV, 2023).

So, as the believers gather, pastors are there to lead the community. However, there are different titles (Ephesians 4:11) that a leader can hold to carry out the great mission of Christ. “Theological institutions have a responsibility to prepare ministers for the issues they will

encounter in the churches while remaining focused on the classical disciples of theology” (Dockery, 2017, p. xvii). Indeed, the ministers faced a severe pandemic that changed how to reach those who could not or decided not to physically come to the church building. “The Church, a mystery of faith. It is by the light of faith that one explains the exteriorly certifiable miraculous character of this religious society...” (Journet, 2015, p. 30).

### **Role of the Church Community**

Holy Scriptures says in the Book of Matthew 16:18, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (ESV, 2023). Jesus’ Church community was created as He traveled from town to town, and the people gathered around. Some followed. His community of believers was shaped when Jesus went from city to city. The people would gather (Luke 9:11). With different races, genders, ages, and economic statuses (Galatians 3:28), the community became the church. “The church is the public demonstration of God’s power, grace, and wisdom, and is central to his redemptive plan” (Easley & Morgan, 2013, p. 144). The Scripture clarifies that the church is where spiritual formation occurs. As mentioned in Ephesians 2:19-22 (ESV, 2023):

So, then, you are no longer strangers and aliens. However, you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Church communities provide a space for individuals to come together. It is a culture that is built with those involved. It is a place to be educated, praise and worship God, and provide a sense of family. However, the place does not have to be a building identified as a church. Akin (2014) writes that one should continuously talk about God and His Word as a Believer. This is important to remember as the research discusses receiving the Word of God in a remote location outside the building called a church. This constant teaching has mentioned the Scriptures.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Moreover, the words I command today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and your gates. (ESV, 2023, Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

## **Digital Communication**

Communication is when information is either sent or received. The first evidence of communication was in Genesis 1:3 when God spoke to the darkness that came upon the face of the deep God and said, “Let there be light” (ESV, 2023). The darkness received the information, and the light was formed. Today, there is still an exchange of verbal and non-verbal communication methods. Wise (2014) expresses that communication is vital and that humankind is hard-wired to communicate. He mentions that this is in our blood. Communication is simply the core of our existence. It is who we are. For success in establishing productive and effective lines of communication, the glue to formal and informal lines of communication is needed. Jesus communicates through our faith, and our faith speaks through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17, John 10:27-28).

As a result of its importance, communication must be noticed in the digital world. In this digital world, you will find the sending and receiving of information being transmitted through the Internet, intelligent and digital devices, and other instruments of technology. Communication does not have to come face-to-face with an individual. Things and devices have been used to communicate. God Himself spoke through clouds (Exodus 19:9), through a burning bush (Exodus 3), and in a whisper (I Kings 19:12). It is essential to know the audience as they must be engaging.

Digital communication is becoming more prevalent now than it was pre-COVID-19. This increase in digital communication should be a part of a senior pastor's decision-making regarding the church's ministry. Digital communication is going to occur through digital technology. Students and churchgoers are learning from the use of digital communication. Tools must be implemented to carry out effective digital communication. Individuals must learn how to navigate the internet, as does the teacher. "In the virtual world, relatively few people are embedded in relationships where they are well-known" (Smith, 2015, p. 98). Schlag and Muller (2021) introduced the German term 'Sinnfluencers.' Influencers are "influencers in the field of religious meaning-making. The term refers to the broad phenomenon of secular digital influencers" (Schlag & Muller, 2021, p. 101). Both authors also introduced Religious Sinnfluencers, which follows the logic of digital influencers and their public appearance (Ajibade, 2019, 2021). Digital communication is here to stay. The usage of this form of communication is at the door of the church community, and it should be embraced (Hebrews 13:21).

### **Online Church**

While the online church is not new, many have had to engage in implementing a church online as a direct response to the closure of church doors. Some churches did not have online worship service as an option pre-COVID-19. Campbell (2020) writes, "Many church leaders who never thought of the internet as a tool for Christian worship and communication have been forced to think again" (p. 7). This unexpected shift due to the pandemic caused churches to explore alternatives for connecting with churchgoers to worship and maintain the ministry. This has caused an increase in the implementation of digital technology and online platforms.

The Word of God expresses that God arranges the body's members (I Corinthians 12:18). Modern-day Christianity has embraced individuality, and the online church provides that option

rather than a corporate worship service. Congregations became creative in how they continued with service but followed the mandate. “One local congregation, for example, has taken the initiative to provide a local care home with the means to access online worship through large-screen televisions” (Elliott, 2021, p. 51). The Body of Christ gathers because they need each other. The body is made of many parts, and each piece plays a role in the work of the ministry. If any part of the body becomes unfortunately disabled, how one approaches accomplishing a task becomes slightly tricky. Each body part matters and needs each other to survive (I Corinthians 12:21).

The online community became more extensive, and the face-to-face community became smaller. The online church is a community of Believers who continue worshiping the Lord and receiving biblical instructions from an internet-based approach (Hutchings, 2017). This group continues discussions, maintains friendships, supports one another, and other key religious goals through computer-mediated communication (I Peter 4:10).

Communicating in person or virtually requires the same principles that nurture a connection (Campbell, 2020). These principles are knowing your audience, space, and message and engaging and empowering your audience (Campbell, 2020, p. 11). Although some churches may not have had online services, Hutchings (2017) notes that hundreds of thousands of people make up the online community.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an increase in this community, creating a new way for some churches to communicate the Good News through live streaming. However, some churches were unfamiliar with live streaming and depended on others to teach them. Bryson, Andres, and Davies (2020) pointed out that churches learn from other churches through friendships and networking (p. 366). The transition for some churches was not seamless as they faced

unfamiliarity with the intricacies of live-streaming technology. Despite being unable to pivot to other digital ministry tools, like live streaming, there was a noticeable increase in virtual communities, and the senior pastors had to implement it quickly.

Hutchings (2017) speaks to a term that surfaced: the I-Church.

In this initial version, i-church presents itself as a website and a community seeking ‘to give people an alternative way to engage with the life of the church, to learn more about the Christian faith and to express their Christian commitment (p. 92).

There are certainly gaps that need to be filled when implementing online services. Those responsible for its implementation have a few things to consider. Age, literacy, geographical location, and financial status, to name a few. For instance, Lee (2017) researched and found that churches in urban areas are more likely than rural churches to use various marketing and communication practices (p. 389).

Online services provide outreach and the opportunity to evangelize. Also, the Body of Christ and those who wish to join have access to one another for encouragement, receiving blessings, and offers another discipleship tool. An uptick in social media occurred, and Facebook became the most popular social media platform. Earls (2020) noted that 52 percent of those surveyed stated they posted their service online after the service, 32 percent replied that they live-streamed, and 10 percent live-streamed only the sermon. Online services have challenges. Hodø1 (2021) says that for someone to consider using technology and online communication to grow the church is an exaggeration.

### **Digital Pastor**

Technology began to merge into the church years ago. Cameras, lights, and mobile devices that caused hard copies of Bibles to turn into handheld electronic Bibles all became a part of the norm rather than selective individuals with this access. This integration of technology into

the church has brought about changes in the way churches conduct worship services. Technology continues to evolve, and delivering the Word of God is paramount, which may include using tools to effectively fulfill the church mission by increasing spiritual formation in the digital community.

Today, we live within a finger's reach of a digital device. From laptops to smartphones to smart cars to smart eyeglasses, a plethora of shiny digital objects connect us to the Internet, to each other, and a vast global library of information (Thibeault & Wadsworth, 2014, p. 21).

Whether digital or not, the pastor is responsible for leading the communities, both face-to-face communities and online communities, as mentioned in Scripture, "And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (ESV, 2023, Jeremiah 3:15). Technology is being used to continue with spiritual formation. The Word of God must be heard by those who want to receive it, and its lines of communication should be adequate to continue God's plan.

The Scripture clarifies, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (ESV, 2023, Romans 10:14). As a result of COVID-19, more in-person pastors became online pastors, and with change comes more responsibility. The mere thought is that as a church moves to an online experience, others not affiliated with the pre-pandemic may join. Pastors should consider additional responsibilities that accompany the switch to online service. The pastor must care for those who become affiliated but do not wish to enter the church building.

### **Digital Leadership**

Due to the changes required as the pandemic swept this country, a pivot among leaders became obvious. When there is a change in time, it triggers a change in the paradigm. Believers

are instructed to transform into the image of God (Romans 12:2). This transformation occurs by God through Jesus Christ, and to embrace this, Believers must change their thinking. A response to the reactions of the fallout of the pandemic changed some leaders who only pastored individuals face to face or in an assembly of Believers now had to consider becoming digital leaders as well. The old way of leading had to change to carry out the work of the ministry. Although this may have brought on some hesitation by some leaders, those feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty had to be put away (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Leadership in the virtual space using technology is a process of social influence mediated by advancing information to the audience to change the receivers' attitudes, feelings, thoughts, behavior, and individual or corporate performance (Avolio et al., 2020). This responsibility rests not just with the pastor but all church leaders. It is essential that the virtual community feels a part of the ministry while not being physically present. Digital leadership is critical in a virtual community. The Holy Scripture teaches that legitimate leaders must rightly direct others. It is a delegation from God (Mark 10:42-45).

In the virtual world of Tech, connection and isolation cannot be separated (Thomas, 2011); individuals are isolated in their own space, but digital leaders are responsible for keeping them connected. Everyone in the virtual space has an interest in something that the digital leader is required to meet (Philippians 2:4). Thibeault and Wadsworth (2014) wrote, "While the digital age has done so much to improve our world, it has dramatically changed our social structure, often further isolating us from each other" (p. 19).

With changes, leaders must educate themselves to communicate effectively with others. As leaders are now engaged in the virtual community, there is a need for accountability, transparency, social interaction, and a desire to build families both in-person and virtually.



“Virtual team leaders or e-leaders must develop best practices that can face unique issues and challenges in the virtual organization” (Sahay & Baul, 2016, p. 55).

Sheninger (2019) contributes to the work of digital leadership by offering seven Pillars of Digital Leadership. These pillars are areas inside the culture of all schools and can be improved or enhanced using technology. Below are the seven pillars (p. 20), with short descriptions supported by scriptures. According to Sudibjo (2019), “an appropriate social climate must first be established by the maintenance of effective communication. Leaders are still required to exemplify effective interpersonal skills using technology” (p. 2). Digital leaders must acknowledge the shift in society because the change impacts the teachings and resources, and the Believers must be equipped to serve. Not everyone welcomes change, and leaders must present opportunities for those fluent in technology and others with some reserves accessing digital platforms.

Malakyan (2019) summed up digital leadership using four words: computing, communication, content, and multi-media. Digital leadership is using the digital tools presented and teaching in a digital world. Senior pastors have now become digital leaders and must use the tools already prepared and do so on social media, websites, blog sites, or even podcasts. Equipping the saints (Ephesians 4:11-13) in the digital world is just as important as it has been done in the past. Senior pastors must suit up with the Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18) and contribute to the spiritual formation of Believers on the spiritual platforms.

Senior pastors will learn that digital leadership is relational because a relationship is formed between the followers and the leaders in social media. Lastly, senior pastors will also help foster good relationships between the followers (Hebrews 10:24-25). In the digital space, participation activities fluctuate, and the digital leader must remain consistent when accessing

the social media platform (e.g., Instagram). Moses shares in Deuteronomy 10:12-13 that individuals should be consistent and persistent regarding God and their obedience.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

A theoretical framework provides an opportunity for the researcher to have the data being collected supported by knowledge of scholars that were formed previously. Theories strengthen research. This researcher aims to share areas that helped frame the study being presented. This section will allow the reader to understand the purpose of the study by providing a sturdy base for the research. Creswell (2003) agrees that a framework guides the researcher's study.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused countless impacts on this country and abroad. It is a global disaster, a pandemic that turned the usual way of living on its head. It interrupted the lives of humanity and left individuals scrambling to make sense of it all. The pandemic created a demand for change in the operations of businesses, schools, restaurants, and even Christianity. The Christian Community found the need to make critical decisions on how to function and operate moving forward, as the standard way could not continue.

As a result of the social distancing mandate, pastors decided to close the doors to the church. Darmawan, Giawa, and Budiman (2021) mention that several studies have begun to show that worship services should be conducted virtually rather than in person. Churches that were well-established financially could move quickly into the virtual world of worship, but other churches may not. These unprecedented times, which once restricted but now limit the opportunity for Believers to join each other in the local church for worship, are an ongoing topic of discussion. Seeking direction and guidance on opportunities to spread the Word of God outside the four walls of a building is a well-overdue topic.

Indeed, the Word of God says, “not neglecting to meet together” (ESV, 2023, Hebrews 10:25). Nonetheless, the physical doors of the brick-and-mortar structure closed, not the Church itself. Jesus Christ told Peter, “And on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (ESV, 2023, Matthew 16:18). In this chapter and verse, the reference to church by Jesus, in this context, was not indicating a physical building made of bricks and mortar. He used the church terminology to identify a spiritual community of believers. So, the mention is solely about forming a spiritual community, not a physical structure.

This section provides areas that are contributing to the framework of this research. Senior pastors must teach and know what is needed to remain relevant to those who follow. Four areas make up the theoretical framework: communication, cybersociety, digital literacy, and innovation. Communication provides ways to transmit information, cybersociety explores the impact of digital technologies, digital literacy speaks to the skillset needed to navigate and utilize digital technologies effectively, and innovation focuses on how one adopts and adapts to new technologies.

### **Communication**

Effective communication is critical to leaders continuing with the spiritual formation of Believers and compelling those who are not Believers. The Book of Proverbs 18:21 states, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (ESV). This researcher wants to emphasize the need for effective communication between leaders and followers.

The theory of communication is the scientific process of sending and receiving shared information Novak (2019). Communication theory explains the principles, methods, and components that affect a message. According to Simonson, Janice, Craig, and Jackson, Jr.

(2012), additional prominent theorists of communication are Kurt Lewin, Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Carl Hovland, James Carey, and Elihu Katz, to name a few.

When ideas and thoughts are shared between two parties, the sender and the receiver of information, there must be an understanding between them. An agreement is optional because two can communicate and agree that they disagree with the information shared. When this understanding from both parties occurs, effective communication takes place.

Fuchs (2016), a leading digital media theorist, stated, “Communication does not simply exist but needs to be produced and reproduced. Communication is not a form of exchange, but humans’ social production of shared meanings through which they interpret each other and the natural, social, economic, technical, political, and cultural world” (Fuchs, 2016, p. 182).

Colossians 4:6 states, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (ESV, 2023).

Theorist Jürgen Habermas believes that “communication’s goal is to reach understanding” (Fuchs, 2016, p. 185). The researcher referenced this theorist because of the importance of effective communication. Leaders must communicate effectively with believers and nonbelievers in person or virtually. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (ESV, 2023, Matthew 28:19-20). The teaching of God must be communicated effectively to fulfill the purpose of discipleship, and that is to teach so others may follow the commandments of God. Myers (2009) stated, “To succeed and prosper, and to fulfill their potential to truly impact the clarity of message and the understanding between organizations and their customers, technical communicators must move away from their comfort zones and assert themselves” (Myers, 2009 cited in Spilka, 2009, p. 2).

As mentioned, this research will use a qualitative method of analysis, and Foote (2022) says, “Communication theories developed by qualitative and interpretive researchers are often about interdependent, embedded, recursive processes” (p. 8). As ministries use online platforms, some may begin to be independent. While some work independently, you will find that those in the online community build a network, or what some would call a family. “Online communities refer to groups of people that form and organize online to meet collective goals” (Foote, 2022, p. 4).

While some churches have online services, they continue in-person services as well. So, in cases before COVID-19, participating in a worship service at home existed. These individuals were not asked to do so but chose to do so. “In some ways, online communities resemble voluntary organizations (Cress et al., 1997; McPherson, 1983, as cited in Foote, 2022, p. 4). As in voluntary organizations, members are typically unpaid volunteers, without formal roles, who are free to participate in multiple organizations” (Foote, 2022, p. 4). This community of online Believers builds a society of their own, often having language that only pertains to those in these online communities.

### **Cybersociety**

Cybercommunities continue to expand. The uptick in using Internet applications is growing, and senior pastors, church leaders, and ministry teachers must embrace it. The ability to link individuals on tablets, cell phones, and computers has benefits. Leaders and Christian teachers must welcome those who have chosen to become a part of cyberspace, an environment on the internet.

It is a community that the leaders must educate themselves on and their leaders to produce effective digital ministry. “Many online communities exist on platforms, which they are

only semi-independent of. Platforms often provide the technical infrastructure an online community runs on, including software, servers, and internet connections” (Foote, 2022, p. 4).

This is vital information as leaders build the church's digital ministry infrastructure.

Dawson (2004), a researcher who completed a theoretical analysis of religion and the internet, observed in 2004 that ‘the larger framework of our social lives is now the social network more than the community as traditionally conceived’ (p. 85). Dawson assumes that the primary relevance of the Internet to religious life is its affinity with this new structure of social relations in late modern society (2004, p. 76, cited in Lundby, 2011). This observation highlights the transformative impact of digital technology on social interactions, which have become integral to religious experiences. Churches need to increase utilizing digital platforms for worship and fellowship.

The internet’s capabilities have changed significantly. It has expanded in terms of users and their uses, usability, and everyday life. As a result of this expansion, to continue building Christian community leaders, those in the five-fold ministry must begin to accept this change and determine how the implementation within the church will happen. Servant-leaders must acknowledge and embrace the changes. Embracing will strengthen and increase the Believers, fostering a spiritual community in and around the church.

The term five-fold ministry is mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-13. Here, it describes five roles within the Christian Church. Each of these roles is essential to the church's growth, edification, and unity. The five roles are: 1) Apostles, are visionaries who are known to establish new churches and provide spiritual oversight; 2) Prophets, who provide divine messages from God; 3) Evangelists focus on spreading the Good News and those who do not believe in God, 4) Pastors, known as shepherds, cares for and nurture the spiritual well-being of their churchgoers, and 5)

Teachers, those gifted in explaining and interpreting the scriptures. The five-fold ministry shows the diversity in leadership roles in the church. The church can experience spiritual growth, unification, and effectiveness in working on the church mission.

Lundby (2011) states that social networking can only create communities if the network has stability and covers a common purpose with a common point of identification. For the church to be effective in the virtual community, stability within the church related to digital ministry must exist. Hercheui (2009) defines a virtual community as a group of geographically dispersed individuals who share a common interest.

Regarding the digital world and cyber society, the senior pastor must know the threats of entering the virtual space. The senior pastor will have to become or ensure they bring on board the ministry an information technology (IT) expert. One must deal with security threats, the defense against cyberattacks, and information warfare in cyberspace. So, the IT person must be an expert and have additional software skills (Malakyan, 2019).

### **Digital Literacy**

The researcher selected this theory due to the importance of defining technical communication and the need for leaders to be literate in this area so that the mission of spreading God's Word can continue. "Digital literacy for technical communication is designed to help technical communicators make better sense of technology's impact on their work, so they can identify new ways to adapt and evolve" (Spilka, 2009, p. i). The Holy Scripture says, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud and words of this prophecy, and blesses are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near" (ESV, 2023, Revelation 1:3).

As cybersociety has increased, Tan (2013) states that digital literacies received much attention in recent years, and definitions are being extended for the term. Cybersociety is generally

applied to students who interact with textual content online interaction, examining the sources that they use to support their learning. One cannot teach what they do not know. In the Holy Scriptures, it was the apostle Paul who penned to Timothy to study so that he may be approved unto God (II Tim 2:15). Studying and, more specifically, studying the digital cybersociety will increase the knowledge needed to join these digital platforms to communicate effectively with them.

Tan (2013) noted that the Internet supports students learning outside the classroom, contributing to structured conversations in teacher-led and controlled activities such as those established within the virtual learning environment. Hercheui (2009) makes it clear that understanding virtual communities and their governance structures from an institutional perspective is particularly relevant in the current environment in which the number of Internet users and the forms of online interaction. It is for leaders of the Christian communities to ensure that they govern their followers' space. While in cybersociety, it does not separate them from the Body of Believers who join in person.

Tan (2013) writes that much research has been conducted exploring how students access social networking sites, like *Facebook*, to communicate and interact with each other in their initial integration into the university community and in forming social bonds with other students. As more churches have moved to digital ministry, Breakstone (2018) highlights five essential things to consider when moving to a digital platform. Those five things are: 1) currency, making sure that there are regular updates to the site; 2) relevance, the site must be relevant to the services offered by the church and different programs that will include those in the virtual space; 3) authority, this is ensuring that the site is authentic, displaying telephone number, email, and



mailing address; 4) accuracy, the site should be free of spelling, grammatical, and typographical errors; 5) purpose, the intent of the site should be clear to the viewer (Breakstone et al., 2018).

The author, Breakstone (2018), makes a critical note for leaders to heed. “Too many teachers regard their students as the experts, mistaking students’ fluency with digital devices for sophistication at judging the information such devices yield . . . teachers must be provided professional development about how to evaluate online information” (Breakstone et al., 2018). Leaders cannot continue to use social media or digital platforms if they do not train and follow up with those who choose to be online. Leaders cannot just assume that someone with the apparatus to get online knows how or can be effective while using the computer, laptop, iPhone, etc.

Breakstone clarifies that “teachers also need instruction in how to integrate these new digital strategies” (Breakstone et al., 2018). He sums it up by stating, “Educators should understand that teaching students to be careful consumers of online information will require a team effort and substantial amounts of time” (Breakstone et al., 2018). This underscores the importance of ongoing professional development and collaboration among senior pastors, leaders, and educators to implement digital literacy in the church effectively. Ensuring that churchgoers are prepared to understand and receive digital content is essential.

### **Innovation**

When growth is needed, a strong level of innovation is required (Mazzarol & Reboud, 2020;2019). Senior pastors and others are responsible for growing the spiritual community. Now that there is a massive increase in online worship services and the challenges it may present, senior pastors and their teams must be innovated. Growing a church is only one aspect of ministry. Online services have their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. Each of these three

that presents itself to the ministry must be addressed. Leaning on the strengths can help with the weaknesses, but innovation is required.

Liu (2022) states, “Dynamic strategic thinking has to be established, which refers to the ability to constantly innovate and develop flexible strategies in complex markets constantly” (p. 92). At the same time, ministries are not intended to compete against each other. People watching social media or listening through other devices may have short attention spans. Therefore, innovative thinking is needed to ensure the quality of the service is present. When we walk in the spirit of excellence, God is pleased (Galatians 5:16). Senior pastors want people to be drawn to the teachings of God’s Word to build the Body of Christ. Innovating ways to brand online worship services will be beneficial.

Senior pastors must also be innovative in creating an atmosphere of trust. This trust building is not only with the congregations but also with other ministries. Trust and commitment are two words that will ease the transition of digital ministry and help with networking. When churches share, best practices are learned. O’Sullivan and O’Sullivan (2022) contribute that sharing spiritual values coupled with spiritual beliefs fosters a sense of community and place. The digital space will need this sense of community and a safe place. Therefore, senior pastors and the team must be innovative in this area and determine how to address it for implementation.

## **Summary**

While these theories can be prevalent in the offline community, they are just as crucial in the online communities. “Contemporary communication processes now span multiple media, and the separation between online and offline and work and home are increasingly blurry” (Foote, 2022, p.8). The task for some churches will not be easy. There is a possibility that obstacles may get in the way. Leaders must be willing to face communication barriers that arise

when accessing the Internet. Leaders must be ready to make alterations when implementing a digital ministry for those who become part of that virtual community. Becoming comfortable with the computer and accessing the Internet makes it easier to become a part of the virtual community. Novak (2019) states that communication theory highlights true complexities when communicating in person, in writing, in emails, in text, or through a prominent media outlet. The more one understands the theory, the better the communication.

Foote (2022) states, “Understanding why one online community succeeds in reaching its goals while another does not usually have much more to do with how and where the organization is embedded in the larger network (i.e., system) of online communities” (p. 6). The leader must be willing to work so that the Good News continues to be shared and spiritual formation continues. When leaders enhance their place in digital ministry, it fosters a sense of confidence to continue implementing practical tools to share the Good News and strengthen the spiritual growth of churchgoers in the digital space.

While digital ministry is not a new concept, senior pastors are considering how to implement and maintain digital ministry in their churches. The COVID-19 pandemic and the country’s government response caused the church to make some decisions quickly, as it was once known in its operation. The unforeseen need to close the church building doors to comply with social distancing mandates and safeguard the churchgoers’ health caused a pivot in how church services are conducted. Leaders should move expeditiously at any time for the well-being and spiritual growth of those who follow.

## Related Literature

### Hybrid Ministry

This research will focus on online ministry and provide information on the practical implementation of digital ministry. In some cases, this will mean that a church would be administering an additional ministry that would be added to the in-person platform that churches are familiar with pre-pandemic. Not all churches will embrace this digital church concept; instead, they will use a hybrid approach. This will mean that two sets of congregations will attend a worship service. If this is a ministry's approach, the challenge will be that you pay attention to one over the other. The in-person worshipper will not have any technical concerns as those who choose to worship at a remote location.

Ashlin-May (2022) cautions the church not to make those attending a worship service virtually feel less or like second-class citizens. This can be done by not acknowledging the virtual community at the opening of the service or throughout the service. The benediction may be rendered without directly speaking to those in attendance. While the hybrid approach does not physically bring everyone in the same room, there should still be an effort to build relationships between both communities. Clear lines of communication are essential and should become consistent in both spaces.

There are concerns about worship online and the experience of worshipping online. Burton-Edwards (2022) clarifies that when a ministry puts a worship service into a video format, and once it is published on the internet, the service has been experienced by those who view it. It is suggested that the church pre-record its services and post for those online rather than have them sit through watching a live experience because they become spectators if not drawn into or acknowledged through the worship service. Broadcasting live may not effectively engage online

worshippers because of a lack of being able to participate. A noticeable advantage to pre-recording services is that they allow an opportunity to be more interactive and to have live chats with those attending. This interaction connects those online and fosters a community among online worshippers.

God created humankind to worship Him, “but the hour is coming, and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him” (ESV, John 4:23). Worship is not just in the building. Worship can be at your home, in the car, etc. Online services should not replace what you would do while in service. There are plenty of distractions, and it is easier for someone in the virtual space to either get up and tend to something different or scroll to another worship service.

### **Social Media**

Having an opportunity to connect with others across this country and have a conversation with them has become a part of most people's lives. Social media is an essential factor to spell out as a framework for this research. Social media refers to the tools used online to share information from sites to users, user to site, and user to another user. When the words social media are mentioned, many platforms come to mind. Platforms like YouTube are typically used to watch music videos, movies, and church worship services. Facebook is a tool for sharing information about one's personal life. It is mostly user-to-user. However, lately, it has been in high demand for online worship services and Bible study. Other common platforms include Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Liu, Beresindd, and Chisolm (2019) say the benefit of social media is that one can network rapidly with others. Social media can be used for personal use, school, businesses, and church. As each generation comes along, the more social media will be used.

Social media may also pose a safety risk for its users. Parents should ensure that specific platforms are blocked for minors. About the church, senior pastors could invest in IT security, as mentioned in this chapter.

Lewis (2018) defines social media as the websites and applications that enable users to create and share content with networks they construct for themselves. Typically, the owner of the desired platform would fill out the intent and, after approval, can start communicating with others who are also connected to the internet. Social media is used daily; for some, it is the conduit used for sharing news and information, both formally and informally. The MacBook, Dell, Apple, Apple iWatch, and iPad are some instruments used to connect to the Internet.

### **Transparency**

Not only is there a need for leaders to be accountable to the Christian community, but they must also be transparent with them. This move to digital ministry is new to some churches and leaders. Leaders do not need to pretend they know all things. Leaders are followers and students as well. Averill (2021) shares that transparency naturally pairs with modesty.

In the community in which this research pinpoints, there will be a need for transparency. The use of digital ministry is not widespread within some churches. Valentinov et al. (2019) say corporations commit to consumer rights through transparency as a primary medium. Transparency is, by choice, the choice of the individual in a partnership. The church can choose to be transparent with its congregation. Suppose some private information is tied to any digital ministry, and there is an outside IT security breach. In that case, the senior pastor should immediately share this with the congregation.

People appreciate transparency, and some seek it in the church and the secular world. Bennis (2008) indicated that openness and honesty will become widespread only when the

organization's leaders, business, and church make it clear that transparency is valued and will be rewarded. If digital ministry is going to be effective, the leader needs to be open about what they need to learn and be sure to study. The same goes for the follower. Transparency is required there as well. How can things change if the leader does not know a change is needed? 2 Timothy 2:15 states, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (ESV, 2023).

Fulfillment of transparency occurs when three relevant factors are met. Muropa (2023) identifies those three as disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. Disclosure of information to the receivers is essential. The more that is provided, the more the body can trust that they are being kept in the know. The more that the information is clear and understandable, the more it gives a sense of comfort. Lastly, as the information provided is accurate and the more that occurs, those receiving it can know that all information is correct, giving the appearance that transparency is occurring.

A church that operates in transparency sets a tone of liberation, allowing people to be who they want to be in worship service. The more transparent a fellow member becomes, the more the others can help each other grow in the ministry. When it comes to digital ministry, everyone is not tech savvy, and this could include the pastor. Therefore, being transparent could allow the necessary training to ensure the effective implementation of digital ministry.

## **Accountability**

Accountability is crucial in the church as well as the secular world. Leaders are accountable for those who follow them and the teachings of God. Jesus says, “See that no one leads you astray” (ESV, Matthew 24:4). According to Telech (2020), Accountability, by contrast, is an inherently interpersonal form of responsibility that concerns the significance we recognize in the moral relations that we bear with one another.

Accountability in God’s House should be a standard practice. The purpose of the Church is to help others to be accountable for their sins and actions. If the Church cannot be responsible for its actions, it becomes difficult to lead others to accountability. A growing, healthy church will embrace this essential character. Regarding accountability, it is suggested that the leader take the praise and the blame. Responsibility is with the leader.

There is a common obstacle that causes transparency and accountability to go silent, and that is fear. Leaders may have a difficult time sharing in fear of the repercussions that may happen once the congregation finds out. Fear, if not controlled, can weaken a person and cause the individual to become introverted with what they are facing. Fear of change is inevitable for some. It is attached to one’s ego and can be detrimental. So, when it comes to accountability, leaders should want to be held accountable by the ministry staff and congregation.

To uphold one’s part in accountability, there must be a verbal confession of the wrong. If the pastor has built a cohesive team and a ministry that trusts God and not man, then one’s admission is not just disclosing the wrong but opens an opportunity to discover the best next steps in this Christian walk. Being held accountable is not a wrong against the person but an opportunity to help the individual (James 5:16).



## **Impact of COVID-19 on the Church**

The impact of COVID-19 was not isolated to the United States and its churches. Still, it impacted the global church in an immediate response to the UK Government, which implemented a lockdown because of the virus outbreak. The following day, the Church of England closed all its doors, even for private prayers (Village & Francis, 2023). This research sets out to research the experiences of those who faced this decision for some churches in the United States. This unexpected pandemic transformed the way the Word of God was shared. The existence of the widespread pandemic changed and recorrected the paradigm of the Christian community and its church (Darmawan et al., 2021). As a result, the Church community had to adjust to continue the spiritual formation of the Believers and those who will become Believers (Romans 12:1-2). “Churches have to adapt; they have to ask themselves questions about the implications of being church in this ‘new normal’ context” (Pillay, 2020).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began restricting large gatherings; even with small groups, there was a risk of spreading the virus (cdc.gov). So, churches began to close. The need to reimage the church's future and how the ministry will continue during the pandemic was needed, and churches turned to technology to access electronic platforms (Phillay, 2020). It was inevitable that digital ministry was the appropriate response.

Carson (2005) states, “If the church is unaware of it (changing cultural content) or blind to it, it will continue presenting the Gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new generation” (p. 12). Presentation of the Gospel behind closed is not aligned with Scripture. The Scripture, “go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (ESV, Luke 14:23) became literal.

Adjustments were needed to continue worship services, share sacraments, preach sermons, give tithes, and fulfill the church's mission (Philly, 2020).

This change needed in delivering God's Word was made easy for some but not others. "Several studies show that worship services should be conducted virtually. Some financially established churches with members with strong economic backgrounds can hold this type of worship service" (Darmawan et al., 2021, p. 94). As digital ministry becomes more prevalent, "human life should have the ability to adapt to the fast growth of the digital world" (Darmawan et al., 2021, p. 94). Darmawan (2021) continues by stating that "some. Church members perceive virtual worship services as not to the same degree as the actual, in-person ones but are mere 'mock-services'" (p. 94).

### **Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature**

The researcher's rationale for this study comes from a place of familiarity. This researcher is a small church pastor and belongs to fellowships of churches that include emerging churches. Emerging Churches are churches like the one this researcher pastors that are small but are still moving forward with the purpose for which one is called. At the news break regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the community responded with several concerns and, in some cases, fear. The pastors gathered in prayer and fasting. Pastors quickly gathered very little information made available at the time to inform the followers. Ultimately, the mandate was handed down, and the church doors were opened.

Convening with other churches in the fellowship, the question "What happens now?" was the focus of the conversations. This researcher found himself working with some churches for their worship services online. This was not the path some wanted as they feared the internet, and

neither had the capacity, tools, or technical skills to produce a quality online service representing the Kingdom of God in the best conduct.

Online services are here to stay. If it is not your church, then it will be someone else's church that has the potential of losing its members. So, the rationale of this study comes from a place of experience, and the researcher seeks to find information that will share the personal experiences of others and present to the reader the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities when implementing digital ministry in the church. The gap here is the missing elements from one's experience ministering the Word of God on another platform that one may not be fully informed of. The research is encouraged by the Word of Jesus Christ, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (ESV, 2023, Matthew 28:19-20)

### **Profile of the Current Study**

This study will interview ten senior pastors and ten churchgoers who attend a small church in the State of Ohio. There are twelve questions for the senior pastor and five for the churchgoer, whom the senior pastor will select to participate. The open-ended questions center around the senior pastor and the churchgoers' experience with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. This global attack caused a mandatory social distance requirement. As the virus worsened and the count of deaths rose to the hundreds of thousands, the governmental mandate was extended, and doors to schools, businesses, restaurants, and churches closed.

This study seeks to determine the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for small churches that want to implement digital ministry in their church. The literature review has been provided, and the study follows in the words of Wilhoit (2022), stating, "The church exists to

carry out Christ's mission in the world, and accomplishing this spiritual formation must be a central task of the church. Spiritual formation is at the heart of its purpose for existence" (p. 1). A result of spiritual formation is the heart of the church, and church pastors, teachers, leaders, and followers are vital contributors to making sure it stays alive.

Scripturally, this study is encouraged by Matthew 28: 19-20, where Jesus gives the church its marching orders to go and spread the Word of God. Wilhoit (2022) says, "To respond faithfully to Jesus' instructions, pastors, teachers, and leaders must form the intention and make the decision to live out the New Testament vision" (p. 1). In the Christian community, most churches hold gatherings in buildings where praise and worship occur. The Holy Bible speaks to both, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord" (ESV, Psalm 150:6). The Scriptures also state, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (ESV, John 4:24). There should be a level of excitement entering the church as David describes in Psalm 122. However, as mentioned above, the nation faced the COVID-19 pandemic. As the effects of COVID-19 increased, the world had to adjust in ways it had not before, and online worship service is more prevalent now than before.

Leal (2021) mentioned that the religious sector became collateral damage due to the large outbreak and the fact that some church doors remained open. For the safety of the churchgoers and the goal of not spreading the virus, church pastors and leaders were left with closing the doors to the church building. It is essential to understand that the closure of the church building does not equate to closing the Church as given by God. "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (ESV, Matthew 16:18).

Weekly, the Church is where families and groups of Believers unite in the Gospel. When the church buildings closed, some adverse effects came against those in the churches (Leal, 2021). Churches could not celebrate, worship, or pray as a family, and restrictions were placed on all establishments, including the church. This researcher will utilize the qualitative phenomenological research approach to explore how senior pastors who embody servant-leadership qualities and their churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches as they attempt to develop healthy virtual relationships that maintain personal connections.

### **Chapter Summary**

This research examines small churches' operations and provides information to assist churches' pastors, leaders, and followers in implementing digital ministry. The literature review of this research has already addressed an increase in the use of digital platforms because of the recent pandemic that still exists today. An emergency declaration signed into order by the previous White House administration led to a mandate that doors to businesses, schools, libraries, restaurants, movie theaters, and many other places had to close. For the safety of those in the Christian Community, doors to the buildings were also closed, leaving an opportunity to do other things to share the Word of God with the churchgoers, Believers, and non-believers.

The Church Community had to consider their health issues that would have worsened if the person became infected with the virus. Golden (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the world. The ultimate commandment comes from God, and that is to continue to build the spiritual community. The spiritual community makes and nurtures loving relationships, full of compassion and supporting one another to reach the common goal.

The community should continue to grow in quantity and quality—spiritual formation is essential to ensure that the Believers live the life intended. Equipping them have meaningful relations centered around the virtues found in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (ESV). In the beginning, God created humanity to occupy the earth He made. “And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (ESV, Genesis 1:28).

If Believers are to do so then regardless of obstacles, there must be measures taken to comply with the command of God. In this case, many churches have moved to the digital platform. The author discusses the change, how it is done, and some issues that may arise because of anxiety and uncertainty. Gordon (2012) shares that one problem associated with adopting new technology is that many churches and other religious organizations and institutions have jumped headlong into the quickly moving stream, investing vast amounts of money in new technologies, and some churches know little about the digital world. There will be challenges as churches move into implementing digital ministry. However, the Holy Scripture states in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (ESV). With this said, pastors, leaders, and churchgoers will continue to seek ways to continue in spiritual formation, and God is always there.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Chapter 1 explained the problem's background and statement. Chapter 2 provided the theological framework for this study. In Chapter 3, the researcher gives a synopsis of the research design, identifies the setting, and introduces the study participants and the researcher's role. In addition, it discusses the ethics considered, details data collection methods and instruments to be used, and provides an analysis.

### **Research Design Synopsis**

#### **The Problem**

While digital ministry is not a new concept, its usage has significantly increased due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This unexpected pandemic resulted in substantial changes necessary for the church's mission. Federal restrictions were placed on schools, businesses, companies, and churches. Across the United States of America, churches were required to close to slow the spread of the virus. Griffey (2020) points out that being interactive on digital media has increased and has been incorporated into everyday lives. As a result of the unexpected closure of church buildings, some senior pastors became engaged in spreading the Word of God through digital discipleship.

Garner (2019) stated, "Discipleship lies at the heart of everyday Christianity, defining the identity of the followers of Jesus Christ" (p. 29). Spiritual formation must continue among senior leaders and churchgoers as it is essential to spiritual growth. Digital ministry is an option to take to accomplish the mission. Some would say that the implementation of effective digital ministry strategies is critical. Garner (2019) indicated that when digital media and technology are developed, followers of Christ can combine the richness of Scripture with tradition, creating a dialogue of experience in the media world (p. 29).

Not all senior pastors accept digital ministry. Panzer (2020) indicates that although hybrid connections are a shared experience, many church leaders still have an assumption that Christian communities should primarily exist outside of digital ministry (p. 47). COVID-19 has opened the opportunity to utilize new ways to deliver the Word of God. This may come with some challenges in churches. The importance of keeping churchgoers engaged in and outside the building is facing churches today. The need to continue teaching the essence of worship, praise, and God's word is necessary. The pandemic caused a shift in the spiritual formation of Believers and compelled non-believers to become a part of the Christian Community.

As a result, this is an excellent opportunity for researchers to explore this topic and provide information for churches that have or plan to implement digital ministry strategies in their ministry. Examining churches implementing digital ministry strategies with evidence of best practices for other ministries to consider may be beneficial. Most importantly, the digital ministry is another option for ensuring that the good news continues to be taught in-person or virtually. This can be accomplished through any digital format, such as emails, text messaging, robocalls, blogging, and videoconferencing, to name a few.

### **Purpose Statement**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored how servant-leader pastors and churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches as they attempt to develop healthy virtual relationships that maintain personal connections.

### **Research Questions**

Implementing some digital ministry is moving the traditional in-person worship service experience within church buildings to a digital platform. Digital ministry may be an option for



spreading the Word of God and not necessarily a replacement. Worship services may be hybrid, including co-occurring in-person and online worship services.

For this qualitative phenomenological research, the definition of digital ministry is the uses of technology for church ministry, including streaming services, social media, blogs, texts and emails, telecommunications, videoconferencing, and church websites. This researcher has determined that the following research questions will be used in this qualitative phenomenological research of digital ministry implementations by senior pastors. Those four research questions that focus on effectiveness, possible obstacles to expanding digital ministry, advantages and disadvantages with in-person and virtual worship, and developing healthy virtual relationships are:

**RQ1.** What forms of digital ministry have senior pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective?

**RQ2.** What do senior pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry?

**RQ3.** Do senior pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion?

**RQ4.** How do senior pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction?

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This qualitative phenomenological research used open-ended interview questions conducted virtually through video technology. A researcher using phenomenological research is studying lived experience. Topics that could be included in this research are the nature of intentionality, time, self, body consciousness, and consciousness of others (White & Cooper, 2022, p. 158). The phenomenological research does not ask participants to tell them what they

know about a subject but to share their knowledge of going through something because of the current issue.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at an amenable place for the interviewee and interviewer. The interviewer asked open-ended questions. Researchers use open-ended questions in interviews and surveys to have participants share their lived experiences. Open-ended questions will receive a simple "yes" or "no" response, but open-ended questions stimulate respondents to share a detailed response. Open-ended questions provide those being interviewed the opportunity to express themselves in detail. Closed-ended questions limit responses, giving the researcher less to include in their findings.

One advantage beneficial to the researcher using open-ended questions is that the participants share their experiences in their own words and become more engaged. Another advantage of using open-ended questions is that it increases the validity of the research because the participants speak the facts included in the research findings. As a result, the findings are more genuine and authentic. This researcher wanted to build trust with the participants, give them a platform to share without limitation and create a good rapport. The responses obtained can be considered accurate and honest.

Each of the four research questions had three subsequent interview questions for senior pastors and five interview questions for churchgoers. For senior pastors, three subsequent interview questions were designed to obtain their perspectives and experiences with digital ministry. Similarly, churchgoers were presented with five questions to articulate their lived experience with digital ministry pre-COVID, during COVID, and post-COVID.

The questions were open-ended, but the researcher closely monitored the response to ensure that the respondent answered the question without wavering into other topics unrelated to

the questions. This redirect only occurred once in the 20 participants. Below, you will find the four research questions and their three subsets.

Table 1 Research and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p><b>RQ1. What forms of digital ministry have senior pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective?</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We define digital ministry as “using technology for church ministry, including streaming services, social media, blogs, texts and emails, telecommunications, videoconferencing, and church websites.” Considering this definition, which of these forms of digital ministry have you used in your church, and please explain how you are using them?</li> <li>2. There are traditional ways to measure the effectiveness of church ministries, such as attendance, giving, personal anecdotal evidence, etc. Have you determined their efficacy for the digital ministries you have used, and if so, how?</li> <li>3. Please share some stories of digital ministry effectiveness and some things you have tried and have yet to find as effective or even have discontinued.</li> </ol>
<p><b>RQ2. What do senior pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry?</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. One of the disadvantages of digital ministry could be that it can be impersonal. For instance, someone has compared streaming services to watching a fireplace on television rather than sitting in front of a fire. What do you see as some of the disadvantages of digital ministry?</li> <li>5. Conversely, digital ministry can allow you to reach people who might never attend in person. What advantages</li> </ol>

	<p>have you seen in implementing digital ministries?</p> <p>6. Please describe your thoughts and feelings about embracing digital ministry. Are you excited, ambivalent, or concerned about this type of outreach, and why?</p>
<p><b>RQ3. Do senior pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion?</b></p>	<p>7. Did you change or expand your use of digital ministries due to the COVID pandemic, and if so, please explain what changed.</p> <p>8. Do you plan a future expansion of digital ministries, and if so, which ministries do you hope to expand and why?</p> <p>9. Are any factors hindering you from implementing or expanding digital ministries (such as cost, technological savvy, time factors, etc.)?</p>
<p><b>RQ4. How do senior pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction?</b></p>	<p>10. Have you experienced the impersonal nature of technology, and if so, have you tried anything to reduce or overcome this factor?</p> <p>11. Could digital ministry replace or merely supplement face-to-face personal communication? How do you maintain personal connections with in-person and virtual church members?</p> <p>12. Have you found any tendency towards essentially having two congregations, the face-to-face attendees and your virtual audiences? Please describe your experiences in this regard.</p>
<p>Interview Questions for Churchgoers</p>	<p>13. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, please share how often you attended regular services and whether they were in-person or virtually.</p> <p>14. During the COVID-19 pandemic, please share how often you attended</p>

	<p>regular services and whether they were in-person or virtually.</p> <p>15. As it relates to now, please share how often you attend regular service and whether it is in-person or virtually.</p> <p>16. Please share your experience with virtual and in-person services.</p> <p>17. If possible, please share one advantage and one disadvantage of attending virtual and in-person worship services.</p>
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### **Setting**

The research setting initially started with senior pastors and churchgoers in Ohio. However, after hearing about the dissertation, pastors in Michigan requested to be participants in the research. Therefore, the research setting was in the States of Ohio and Michigan. All senior pastors that participated were a part of one of the several fellowships of Churches. Most participants are affiliated with the fellowship established in 1994. They believe in a spirit-filled life and that every believer should be filled, walk in, be led by, and live in the power of the Holy Ghost.

The fellowship consists of churches across the globe joined by the theologies of the church experience. As it relates to its organizational structure, one international bishop and 25 bishops make up the Council of Bishops. The researcher belongs to one of the fellowships of Churches. However, the researcher did not use affiliation with a fellowship of Churches as a prerequisite to participating in the research.

### **Participants**

Fifteen invitations were sent to senior pastors in Ohio and Michigan to participate in the research. Two of the senior pastors invited responded after the deadline and could not participate.

One senior pastor responded but did not invite a churchgoer, and after two reminders, the senior pastor was not selected to participate. The researcher has yet to receive a response from two invitees. However, the researcher successfully interviewed ten senior pastors and ten churchgoers. Participation in this research was voluntary. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state, “Participation in a study should be seen as voluntary, and the researcher should explain in the instructions for the consent form that participants can decide not to participate in the study” (p. 93).

Invitations were sent electronically using Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board-approved (IRB) email. As a result of the researcher’s affiliation with most of the senior pastors, the contact information was readily available. Others were sent invites based on a recommendation by senior pastors who responded.

Senior pastors could only participate if the churchgoers participated and vice versa. Doing so narrows the research to senior pastors and not any church leader. For churchgoers, rather than asking any churchgoer about their experience, the researcher wanted to include expertise from those who attended the church for at least three years. This approach made sure that both perspectives were represented in this research. The researcher focused on senior pastors and long-term churchgoers to capture significant lived experiences that would provide valuable insights into digital ministry's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities.

Senior Pastors were electronically invited (Appendix C) based on their average church size of churchgoers. The average church size was limited to 25, but no more than 150 regular weekly churchgoers. If the senior pastor did not respond to the first email, the researcher prepared a follow-up email (Appendix D). While the follow-up email was optional, both were approved by the IRB. Participants were interviewed individually. The senior pastors were in the

same church for three years. The churchgoer also had to have been a churchgoer for three years, preferably before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher chose three years to determine some experience at the same church and during the same time together as a pastor and churchgoer. As a result, the researcher sought individuals who held a key position within the church and those who were experienced with its digital ministry, making them subject matter experts capable of applying their experience to the questions (Flick, 2018).

All names of senior pastors and churchgoers are kept confidential, and identities will be protected throughout the findings of this research. The participants received an Informed Consent Form provided by Liberty University's IRB. Attached to the email invite and made available to all parties at the start of the interview. All participants completed their interview with the understanding that they could stop the interview at any time during the session.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Capturing the personal experience of those who either led or attended a church with effective digital ministries was the essential role of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher recorded interviews to ensure an accurate account of one's experience was captured. The researcher's underlying responsibility was to capture the personal encounters of the participants, mainly because "experience is thus at the forefront of the phenomenological method. One quickly realizes that it is indeed experiences that form the core of the research domain" (Cimino & Leijenhorst, 2018, p. 5). Interviews will be transcribed by the researcher for analysis purposes.

Another role of the researcher was to ensure that the interviewees were comfortable and to build a rapport to gather as much as possible from the participants. Therefore, the researcher allowed adequate interview time, 60 minutes per interview, and extended time at the interviewee's approval. While providing an extension, the researcher ensured it was within



reason. Too much time can make it cumbersome for the researcher, and they may not gain any valuable data. Van Manen (2016) states,

It is better to gain a limited number of detailed and concrete stories than many hours of interviews that contain very little experiential material. The researcher may end up with an unmanageable quantity of tapes or transcripts, yet little of it is of interpretive value. (p. 317)

The researcher's role was to accommodate the interviewees. Therefore, the researcher met at a time selected by the researcher. To offer guidance, the researcher provided suggested times but allowed the interviewees to choose a time most convenient to them. The researcher kept sound notes throughout the interview.

In addition to the role of the researcher in making the participants comfortable, the researcher opened the interview with general conversations about their well-being. Moustakas (1994) states, "Often the phenomenological interview begins with a social conversation or a brief meditative activity aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere" (p. 114). The researcher shared brief information on Liberty University and the program in which the researcher is enrolled, the researcher's plan after receiving a doctoral degree, and the purpose of the dissertation, and offered to provide information to the participants if they were interested in reading the dissertation.

Lastly, the role of the researcher was to be the gatekeeper of all information and data gathered from the participants. The researcher collected and reviewed the information from the interview and analyzed the data received. As the gatekeeper of the data, the researcher played a critical role in ensuring the integrity and reliability of the research so that the data presented will provide an understanding of how digital ministry impacts the church and spiritual communities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethics protocol involves values formalized in federal, state, and local laws, codes, and set rules. Legislation frames ethical issues associated with scientific activities. For example, the American Anthropological Association developed its code of ethics. The three moral foundations are the dignity of human beings, the integrity of people, and the value of justice (Gaudet, 2018).

According to the program handbook for Christian Leadership Doctoral Programs, students must apply for review and approval by Liberty University's federally mandated Institutional Review Board (IRB). The body ensures the ethical treatment of research subjects. The researcher proceeded with his research after receiving approval from the IRB (Appendix A). Research can only be executed with IRB approval (p. 23).

Ethics matters a great deal for the integrity of the information received. Creswell and Creswell (2018) define a Code of Ethics as "the ethical rules and principles drafted by professional associations that govern scholarly research in the disciplines" (p. 247). Participants should not have their human rights violated by any research and its methodologies. Participants should not be forced to be included in any study; therefore, it should remain a voluntary experience. Children under 18 and pending State statutory regulations identifying a minor must have the consent of their parents or guardians. There are no minor participants in this research. Again, no human rights or dignity should be violated. The researcher did not include anyone from his current ministry to prevent biases based on personal ties to the church, leadership, or churchgoers. As a researcher, one must be aware of connections with the participants or the research sites so that there is no influence on their interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Confidentiality is critical and was respected throughout the research, during scheduled interviews, and the inclusion of one's experience in the dissertation. The researcher was conscious of his surroundings when conducting interviews. No one was within earshot of the interviews. The researcher reviewed the IRB's Study Information Sheet (Appendix B) at the start of the interviews. All participants could stop the discussion at any time or request that their previous responses be removed from the dissertation. This occurred once, as the senior pastor indicated he had given too much information. The information provided was not recorded in the transcription of the interview. All participant rights were expressed at the beginning and end of each interview.

Lastly, the researcher did not plagiarize. The information presented is the work of the researcher and not others. The researcher assures that the product is based on research conducted and that any outside resources are appropriately noted in the study. Where the researcher paraphrased, he credited the source (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

The researcher used interviews to collect data to obtain senior pastors' and churchgoers' strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for digital ministry. The researcher created the sets of semi-structured open-ended interview questions for both audiences. The researcher made sure to use both the interview guide and procedure. For the senior pastors, there were three sets of open-ended questions for each formed research question, a total of twelve. The churchgoers were asked five semi-structured open-ended questions to capture their experience with in-person and virtual worship services. In some interviews, the participants mentioned other digital options used by the church. Lived experience research is a solid tool for understanding human thoughts

and feelings towards a subject or event. A researcher can appreciate the unique responses of the participants as they reflect their perspective and not that of others.

Audio recordings of the interviews were made on a personal computer owned by the researcher. The password-protected device safeguarded the responses received, was maintained in the researcher's home during the research, and was inaccessible to outsiders. It also allowed the researcher to recall the time spent with the interviewees. In addition, to preserve the time spent with each of the participants, the researcher also used a hand-held recording device. The device was used in case of technical difficulties with the computer. This prevented the researcher from needing to redo interviews if faced with technical failure. The hand-held device was secured to protect the confidentiality of the participants. It was not used during this research and will be stored and destroyed later.

In addition to the above, the researcher also physically wrote notes in a notebook, which was safeguarded during the research. Only one notebook was used, so responses were kept distinct and specific to the participants' responses. The researcher maintains a well-organized storage of data collected for this research. The researcher was the vital instrument responsible for creating a comfortable and safe climate so that the participants would respond honestly and comprehensively (Moustakas, 1994). There were no co-researchers involved in this study.

### **Collection Methods**

Conducting phenomenological research seeks to do a deep dive into the experiences of humans, gathering their lived experiences from their perspective. Various often-used methods capture the essence of these lived experiences. Those include but are not limited to scheduled interviews with participants, observation within a participant's environment, and a discussion with a focus group. While the latter is a widely used method, the researcher used face-to-face

interviews because it allows participants in a group setting to be open and share their experiences as they interact through discussions (Flick, 2018). By doing so, the responses were solely the individual's experience rather than being influenced by the reactions or responses of others.

Researchers collect information to address the questions created and determine the study's outcome. According to Bassot (2022), the data collected brings life to the research. The data collected gives a voice to those involved in the study, which may not be heard otherwise. Recorded audio and video data explored the lived experience and the essence of combined perspectives (Billups, 2021) about digital ministry.

Researchers should seek to collect adequate data to understand the phenomenon or the problem they are searching for. Data collection is essential to qualitative phenomenological study. The primary aim of collecting qualitative data is to supply a range of natural substances from observations relating to the study. Data collection is not finding phenomena but taking the phenomena determined and making them something that can be analyzed (Flick, 2018). Data collection within this research came from the semi-structured open-ended questions used in an organized interview videoconferencing setting.

Specifically, in this study, the researcher collected data by identifying the targeted participants, including the senior pastor who had implemented digital ministry in the church and churchgoers who may have attended in-person worship services and virtual services through digital means. The researcher selected participants to capture diverse perspectives of digital ministry. The participants possessed the relevant knowledge and expertise to provide awareness to the research. Both sets of participants from different areas or states supplied specific experiences from their perspectives and jointly provided lived experiences that can be used to implement effective digital ministry.

## **Instruments and Protocols**

Based on the effectiveness of collecting data from individual participants, this qualitative phenomenological research conducted interviews with both sets of participants using open-ended questions composed by the researcher. Open-ended questions prevented the interviewee from answering with a short yes or no response. The questions were structured to allow more extended reactions from the participants. Keywords like, please explain, share, if not why, were strategically and intentionally included in the open-ended questions. More specifically, the researcher asked participants to describe their experiences. This allowed the participants to openly discuss their personal feelings toward the subject the question posed.

The researcher used a computer and hand-held device to record the one-on-one interviews. The purpose was to maintain the integrity of the information received. Using these devices allowed the researcher to make eye contact with the participants to show them that the researcher was engaged and interested in hearing about their experience. This prevented the interview from being interrupted if the researcher had noted specific responses. Lastly, recorded face-to-face interviews allowed the researcher to be observant and know when to pivot in the discussion.

Remote interviews were conducted and transcribed using Zoom and Teams videoconferencing as the participants chose. The researcher monitored the transcription for accuracy. Billups (2021) suggests that in all cases, the researcher is to observe what is happening and note what is not happening. Researchers must note the overt and covert frame that is present during interviews. In-person interviews did not occur. Video conferencing was cost-effective and convenient for both the researcher and participants. Zoom had advantages; for example, it did not require participants to have an account or download a program to their computer or mobile

device. Zoom created the electronic invitation to meet and provided a link, and the meeting was made accessible by clicking a button. Zoom also provided safeguards as it was password-protected for confidentiality, and the recording was sent directly to the researcher. (Gray et al., 2020).

Before the interview, the researcher shared with each participant that the final written copy of the research would be made public. However, the participants remained anonymous. To remember each participant's responses, names were written down for the researcher's reference. All identifying mentions are redacted. Each participant was asked to read the Study Information Sheet, a change from signing an informed consent (IC) form. The Study Information Sheet provided, to name a few, the title of the research, the name of the principal investigator, the invitation to be part of a Research Study, explained what the study was about and why it was being conducted, and informed the participant about how the interviews would be conducted.

Senior pastors were given latitude on who they selected to participate in the research. The churchgoers had to have attended the same church as the pastor for three years. Giving the senior pastor the responsibility to select the churchgoer confirmed that the churchgoer met the criteria, and the senior pastor was made aware of who participated. However, the responses of the churchgoers are not tied to the responses of the senior pastor in this research. The researcher chose to safeguard the responses of the churchgoer as being done for the senior pastor. All relevant recorded responses appear in this research study. Responses were coded using a qualitative analysis software called Dedoose, which stores data securely and can code multiple responses. The reader will find more information regarding Dedoose later in this research.

## Interviews

This researcher used interviews to gather data for this study. According to Billups (2021), interviews are the best choice when researching people's feelings or viewing a phenomenon. This researcher, through interviewing, will be able to obtain extensive and specific information for the small group of interviewees. This researcher created two sets of open-ended exploratory questions. One set of questions will be used during one-on-one interviews with senior pastors, and the other will be used with churchgoers. The researcher is looking to get information regarding digital ministry. Billups (2021) states, "Interview data often lead to the development of new ideas, new insights, and new variations on a phenomenon that have already been explored" (p. 3). The open-ended responses will require content analysis methodology for data analysis.

The researcher shared the self-created questions with four senior pastors of churches for their input. The senior pastors have a church membership number beyond the limitations of this research. Therefore, they will not be eligible to participate when the IRB-approved study begins. The four senior pastors selected have an established digital ministry and have been for five years or more. The researcher considers the senior pastors to be subject matter experts. All responses from the four senior pastors were favorable and unanimously gave this researcher the approval and blessings to move forward with the questions. The researcher facilitated semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to be open, providing more data. This type of interview includes space for interchange between the researcher and the interviewees. Here, using this technique for data collecting, the exchange between the researcher and participant is fundamental to act (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Based on the participant's response, the researcher may rephrase or change the question based on the exchange. However, the questions were consistent so that all participants had the opportunity to answer the same question.



The researcher intentionally paid close attention to the participants' responses to discern when it was most appropriate to step in and steer the interviewee back to the original question if the reactions seemed to go outside the scope of the question. When conducting qualitative interviewing, it is critical to exercise sound and active listening skills to know when to probe and afford time for uninterrupted narrative flow (Seidman, 2019). The researcher ensured the interviews remained focused on digital ministry by maintaining a balance between guiding a conversation and allowing participants to share freely.

Also, this researcher knew when not to interrupt so that the whole experience was received during the interview. The role of a researcher as an interviewer is to be conscious of where you are in the questions being asked but focus on where the interview is headed (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Semi-structured interviews will aid in expressing their lived experiences freely but in a controlled space.

### **Data Protection**

Document analysis is a method of examining and thematically analyzing the content of documents, interview transcripts, and publications. Documents can include but are not limited to such sources as books, articles, sermons, letters, diaries, meeting minutes, legal documents, and newspaper clippings. A particular collection of quotations is identified using some form of inclusion criteria and is then systematically examined using a coding process described in the data analysis section below. In summary, you should discuss the documents that will be reviewed, the criteria for selecting the papers, and how those documents will be accessed.

### **Procedures**

This researcher submitted the qualitative prospectus to Liberty University's IRB for approval. Once approval was received, the researcher emailed senior pastors a request to

participate in a study related to digital ministry. Included in this request were the following: 1) an introduction of the researcher, 2) a short narrative of Liberty University and the doctoral program the researcher is enrolled, 3) the purpose statement of the research, 4) a copy of the interview questions, 5) a copy of the IRB approval notification, and 6) a callback number to set up an interview.

The researcher did a web search of senior pastors in Ohio and Michigan to recruit them to participate in the research. In addition, emails were sent to those affiliated with the fellowship of churches known to the researcher. The invite included an ask to interview one of their members who meets the prerequisites.

The researcher sent 20 invites but will only interview the first ten pastors who responded first. The sampling is intentionally small. Salmons (2015) states that qualitative studies entail deeper and more detailed exploration with a small group of participants (p. 5). The interviews of the senior pastor or the churchgoer did not proceed until all parties included in the research executed consent forms.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is the research portion where the data received is organized, analyzed, and interpreted. Vogt (2014) suggests that qualitative data analysis methods are portable across the data that has been collected. This is because qualitative data is primarily textual. No matter how the data is contained in its different formats, it all is transcribed into text.

This section will explore the analysis methods and trustworthiness. The researcher will first transcribe all interviews and ensure the information is protected. In this first step, the researcher will categorize the responses with “senior pastor” and “churchgoer.” Next, the researcher will read all transcripts to understand the responses given. Following this step, the

researcher will code all the data gathered. Lastly, the researcher will determine common themes and ensure that all information received is presented. This section also includes the four primary criteria to determine if the data can be trusted. Those four have credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

### **Analysis Methods**

There are six popular qualitative data analysis methods (Warren, 2020): qualitative content, narrative, discourse, thematic, grounded theory, and interpretive phenomenological analysis. Qualitative content is considered the most straightforward as it is the content of the data collected. The narrative is the researcher listening to participants and then indicating what it means. Discourse is analyzing the language from a social and cultural standpoint. Thematic, the fourth most popular group, is the joint statements made by those in group focus groups. It determines the common theme. The ground theory looks at data that can intentionally create a new theory from the ground up. This method allows researchers to let the data received determine the results. Lastly, interpretive phenomenological analysis allows the researcher to let personal experience be the standard data collected.

Coding is essential for the data received as it translates the data collected into words, numbers, letters, or graphic markers, the symbols that come from coding (Vogt, 2014). The researcher used Dedoose, one of many software programs that create Excel spreadsheets, to determine the results. Dedoose is a web-based software designed to provide a researcher with qualitative data analysis when conducting mixed-methods or qualitative research. Using this software made it easier to import the responses from the participants into a spreadsheet. The software organized and stored the data so the researcher could access it during the study. The program was beneficial in meeting the fundamental step of analyzing the data. Coding depends

on consistency. Kuckartz and Radiker (2019) acknowledge that coding is the oldest qualitative analysis technique, but it is still the most widely used.

The researcher transcribed, organized, determined, and applied codes to assess themes and patterns. By coding and thematic analysis, the researcher was able to determine the implications of the data, which provided insights into the phenomenon of digital ministry within the church community. This research validates and summarizes themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative phenomenological research, trustworthiness is needed to establish the findings' credibility and validity. Trustworthiness also refers to the reliability and accuracy of the research process and findings. The researcher ensured that the findings accurately represent the senior pastors' and churchgoers' lived experiences and perspectives. Researchers must meet four primary criteria to ensure the final data can be trusted when using qualitative research methods. Those four are 1) credibility, 2) dependability, 3) confirmability, and 4) transferability.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility is an essential part of qualitative research, reflecting the findings' trustworthiness and reliability. Being transparent regarding the researcher's background and qualifications helps establish credibility. The searcher shared the IRB approval with the participant and gave a little background on Liberty University and the researcher's current status. The data collected must also have credibility. The participants were assured that the integrity of their responses would be collected as used for the intent it was being collected.

During the participant's interviews over Zoom and Teams, the sessions were transcribed in real-time, with participants encouraged to follow along despite any transcription errors, which were corrected later. An audio recording was used, and Microsoft Word's transcription feature

was used post-interview to generate a second transcription. The researcher cross-referenced both transcriptions to confirm their accuracy. Corrections were made when needed. Lastly, the researcher consulted with two senior pastors to validate the accuracy of the transcriptions.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability refers to the findings being consistent and stable across the context. The researcher maintained detailed documentation, including the data collected, the coding schemes, and the decisions. The tools used to obtain data were meticulous, solidifying the dependability of the data. The researcher aimed to record decisions and actions to ensure reliability and trustworthiness so that others could replicate the research and verify it.

### ***Confirmability***

With confirmability, the researcher ensured the integrity of the data by checking and rechecking it during the time it was collected and analyzed. Coding played a part in identifying the codes and patterns of the analyzed data. The researcher was transparent throughout the process, specifically during the interviews. The participants could see their interviews being transcribed as they answered the questions.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability is essential that a researcher must account for in qualitative research. Determining what information from the study can be transferred to current knowledge or similar studies is crucial. This research and its findings could be shared with senior pastors who either have a digital ministry or do not. The research information could be used for those with a digital ministry to see if any best practices can be incorporated into its current ministry. Those senior pastors who do not have a digital ministry can determine if the findings could be a guide to implement in the ministry, knowing the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities it will bring.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter describes the qualitative research methods intended to investigate the digital ministry's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. The research problem was identified. This chapter shares that the research study intends to provide a platform for effective digital ministry, specifically in the church. While digital technology is not new, many churches have turned to it to spread the Gospel. The recent COVID-19 pandemic caused churches to close their doors, and digital technology was a resource to continue providing biblical teachings to its followers.

The chapter provided four research questions and 17 interview questions that the researcher used during the one-on-one interviews with senior pastors and churchgoers. The chapter shared that this qualitative phenomenological method was selected for this research, and the researcher and interviews were used to gather data. This qualitative phenomenological research shares the lived experiences of church leaders and churchgoers when implementing digital ministry. The researcher maintained a level of trust with its participants. The participants were allowed to respond to the interview questions to the best of their ability, which will be necessary. This chapter outlined what steps are required moving forward. The chapter ends with the four primary criteria ensuring the data is trustworthy.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

### Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to understand the lived experience of senior pastors and churchgoers. The study explored how digital ministry is perceived and interpreted from the perspectives of pastors identified as servant leaders and their churchgoers. This transcendental phenomenological research investigated digital ministry's effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities.

The phenomenological study allowed ten seasoned pastors and ten highly active and involved churchgoers to participate in a one-on-one interview focused on their unique experiences with the digital ministry. More specifically, all twenty participants brought forth their perceived advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry and stayed within their personal preferences. The one-on-one interviews were purposely conducted so that the participants could speak freely. Conducting interviews as a group has its advantages and disadvantages. For instance, a group interview could expand the conversation between participants because individuals could agree or disagree with a participant, and it opens an opportunity for detailed responses.

On the other hand, participants may not feel comfortable sharing in a group setting and may not want to express disadvantages in front of others or their pastor. The researcher wanted to ensure that the participant's responses were independent of what others may have stated in a group setting. Therefore, individual one-on-one interviews were selected as the method of gathering information.

The interviewer used open-ended questions to stimulate the participants to give more details in their responses, unlike closed-ended questions that would have resulted in yes or no answers with no specifics. As a result of using open-ended questions, the participants expressed

themselves openly, and there was a diverse array of responses, yet they yielded similar outcomes. Each of the interviewees seemed at ease answering the questions and eagerly provided information to assist the researcher in gathering information on the topic of the study.

Surprisingly, this form of interview raised points of view that were not anticipated. Most participants shared their appreciation for participating in fascinating and timely research.

This method of interview questions supports qualitative research and increases the research's validity as the participants' expressions form it. The responses were heartfelt, the participants were at ease, and a strong rapport was built, leading to the participants being honest and transparent. By creating trust and open communication, the researcher enhanced the validity and reliability of the research findings. Individual responses are shared later in this research. The following four research questions kept the study focused on determining the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of digital ministry in the church:

**RQ1.** What forms of digital ministry have servant leader pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective?

**RQ2.** What do servant leader pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry?

**RQ3.** Do servant leader pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion?

**RQ4.** How do servant leader pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction?

This chapter contains the responses of the participants gathered from the one-on-one interviews. Additionally, the researcher briefly describes the participants while safeguarding their identities by assigning fictitious names. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher intentionally uses “fellowship of churches” rather than the actual fellowship the church is affiliated with, does not use the name of the church, and will only identify the church location by



state and not by the city in which it is located. As it relates to the churchgoers, these participants are identified numerically (e.g., churchgoers one, two, three, etc.). However, the researcher ensures that the responses of both pastors and churchgoers are combined when discussing the outcomes regarding the advantages and disadvantages of a particular church.

Also, in this chapter, the compilation protocol and measures will be discussed. Doing so ensures that the research was conducted rigorously, systematically, and ethically, producing credible and valid findings. Demographic and sample data will share the diversity of the participants and assess the transferability and transparency of the research findings. In this chapter, the researcher shares the data collected from the one-on-one interviews and correlates them to the research topic, creating transferable themes. These themes could be applied to other settings. The chapter ends by assessing the validity of the methods used in this research and pointing out strengths and weaknesses to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research study.

### **Compilation Protocol and Measures**

The researcher of this qualitative research used a systematic process in collecting and keeping the data received. Virtual interviews were conducted to gather the qualitative data. Interview questions (Appendix E) were pre-selected and remained consistent throughout the 20 interviews. There were three interview questions for each of the four research questions asked of the senior pastor. The three interview questions were created to allow the interviewee to share their experience of the defined research question. The churchgoers were asked five questions specific to their experience with a form of digital ministry before, during, and after the heightened pandemic.

Each interview was recorded on a handheld device, using Microsoft Teams and Zoom videoconferencing. Microsoft Teams is a videoconferencing platform that is offered through Microsoft Teams. It was designed to let individuals within organizations chat on video and let users see each other during virtual meetings or interviews. Zoom is a similar videoconferencing platform that has become widespread among businesses, churches, agencies, and individuals. Riedl (2022) stated, “Notably, the adoption rates of videoconferencing increased significantly in 2020, predominantly because videoconferencing resembles face-to-face interaction” (p. 153).

The researcher ensured that the data collected was consistently managed. Both videoconferencing platforms were recorded on a handheld device and by Teams and Zoom. The researcher received the visual recordings of the interviews, and both platforms provided a transcript. During the interviews, the researcher ensured that the transcripts were accurate. While there was a need to make minor changes and additions, the integrity of the recordings was prevalent. In addition, the researcher used Microsoft Word to transcribe the audio recordings from the handheld device through its dictation feature. This was done by opening Microsoft Word on the computer, clicking the dictate button, starting the recording, and, as the audio played, it began to transcribe the interview. The transcripts were reviewed and used later in the research.

Throughout the 20 interviews, the researcher was mindful of body language, using it to display engagement during the time together. The researcher intentionally avoided any gestures that might have the interviewee believe that there was agreement or disagreement. This approach helped maintain a neutral and unbiased stance. The participants expressed themselves without feeling influenced by the researcher's nonverbal cues. The researcher fostered a supportive and nonjudgmental environment.

### **Demographic and Sample Data**

This section of the qualitative research provides the demographic and sample data essential in the context of those who participated in the study. Typically, data will show the participants' age range, gender, racial or ethnic background, educational background, occupation, and socioeconomic background. However, this research could be more extensive in terms of demographics. The conventional demographic criteria do not apply in this context. Participants in this research were required to be aged 18 or above and have served as senior pastors for at least three years. Church attendees needed to be aged 18 or older, had to have been at the church for three years or more, and had to be chosen by the senior pastor involved in the study. Refer to Table 2 for the demographic breakdown pertinent to this research.

**Table 2 Demographic of Participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Attended church for three years or more</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Senior Pastor	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Female	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Male	Black/African American
Churchgoer	Yes	Male	Black/African American

The preceding table illustrates that all twenty participants satisfied the research criteria regarding their position and tenure within the church. Of the senior pastors, 90% were male and 10% were female. Conversely, among the churchgoers, 30% were male, and 70% were female (see chart below). While all participants identified as Black/African American, invitations for research participation were extended to pastors outside this predominant ethnic group, yielding responses. Notably, one senior pastor identified as Caucasian; however, the interview was terminated due to the non-participation of the associated churchgoer. The senior pastor's input could only be considered if the churchgoer met the participation requirement.

The subsequent table presents the date and duration of each participant's interview. To protect participant anonymity, everyone was assigned a pseudonym based on their title and the sequential order of their interview. The participants will be referred to as Senior Pastor (SR) or Churchgoer (CG) and a number, in short, SP1, SP2, SP3, CG1, CG2, CG3, etc. Participants were unaware of their interview order. The actual names of the participants are recorded in both the audio recording and transcript to ensure accurate attribution in direct quotations used in the findings.

**Table 3 Interviewer's Location, Interview Date and Duration, Videoconferencing Platform.**

<b>Pseudonym Name</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>	<b>Length of Interview</b>	<b>Interview Platform</b>
Senior Pastor One (SP1)	Ohio	September 7, 2023	55 mins 50 secs	Teams
Churchgoer One (CG1)	Ohio	September 7, 2023	18 mins 21 secs	Teams
Senior Pastor Two (SP2)	Ohio	September 10, 2023	60 mins 2 secs	Zoom
Senior Pastor Three (SP3)	Ohio	September 12, 2023	37 mins 27 secs	Teams
Churchgoer Two (CG2)	Ohio	September 13, 2023	10 mins 1 sec	Teams
Senior Pastor Four (SP4)	Ohio	September 15, 2023	37 mins 42 secs	Teams
Churchgoer Three (CG3)	Michigan	September 18, 2023	6 mins 9 secs	Teams
Senior Pastor Five (SP5)	Michigan	September 19, 2023	29 mins 45 secs	Teams
Senior Pastor Six (SP6)	Ohio	September 21, 2023	43 mins 21 secs	Teams
Senior Pastor Seven (SP7)	Ohio	September 21, 2023	28 mins 58 secs	Zoom
Senior Pastor Eight (SP8)	Ohio	September 22, 2023	37 mins 19 secs	Teams
Churchgoer Four (CG4)	Ohio	September 22, 2023	4 mins 41 secs	Teams
Churchgoer Five (CG5)	Ohio	September 27, 2023	10 mins 25 secs	Teams
Churchgoer Six (CG6)	Ohio	September 27, 2023	13 mins 25 secs	Teams
Churchgoer Seven (CG7)	Ohio	September 28, 2023	6 mins 35 secs	Teams
Senior Pastor Nine (SP9)	Ohio	October 4, 2023	28 mins 20 secs	Zoom
Churchgoer Eight (CG8)	Ohio	October 4, 2023	5 mins 5 secs	Zoom
Churchgoer Nine (CG9)	Ohio	October 4, 2023	8 mins 24 secs	Zoom
Senior Pastor Ten (SP9)	Michigan	October 5, 2023	49 mins 47 secs	Teams
Churchgoer Ten (CG8)	Michigan	October 5, 2023	6 mins 54 secs	Teams

The interviews were conducted between September 7, 2023, and October 5, 2023. Eighty percent (80%) of the interviewees were residents of Ohio, while the remaining twenty percent (20%) were from Michigan. Participants were provided the choice of being interviewed via Zoom or Teams. Fifteen interviews were used with Teams, with the remaining five choosing Zoom. In total, the researcher conducted over eight hours of interviews. The senior pastor's interviews averaged 41 minutes, and the churchgoer average interview lasted nine minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

This section delves into the data analysis and findings of the participants' lived experiences through virtual face-to-face interviews. The researcher maintained the organization of the data throughout the research. By recording interviews, transcribing, and coding the shared lived experiences, the researcher, after an initial reading of all data received, could determine themes that best reflect the phenomenon of the research.

### **Transcribing**

After the completion of the twenty interviews, the researcher began transcribing each of them. To maintain the integrity of the data received, the researcher was careful in this process so that the actual lived experience of the participants could be noted in the findings. As McMullin (2023) pointed out, transcribing audio is widely considered time-consuming and laborious. The two sources used to transcribe saved the researcher many hours of typing, as it can take three to more than eight hours to transcribe one hour of an interview.

Word-for-word transcripts were created using two significant sources, and the videoconferencing platforms provided a transcript of the interviews. In addition, the dictation function was used in Microsoft Word. To guarantee absolute accuracy, both dictations were transcribed as believed to be spoken by the interviewee, as only some words were recorded, and

some words may have been mispronounced or misunderstood by the researcher or participants. The researcher meticulously reviewed each interview by replaying the recordings, cross-referencing them with the transcripts, and making corrections where discrepancies were identified.

### **Coding**

After ensuring 100% accuracy in transcribing the interviews, the researcher read each interview several times, familiarizing himself with the participants' lived experiences. In addition to absorbing the lived experiences, the researcher began coding the data to determine the common themes. This meticulous process involved analyzing the transcripts, identifying key phrases and patterns, and grouping them into meaningful themes.

The researcher used a web-based qualitative data analysis software known as Dedoose. This software allowed the data to be managed, analyzed, and interpreted the qualitative data. The Dedoose is a software that UCLA researchers created. It provides real-time collaboration among multiple researchers, if necessary, but this research did not include additional researchers. The researcher found Dedoose to be an easy-to-learn interface. The software is free for the first 30 days and only charges for the month the user logs in.

The researcher was allowed to upload video, audio, transcripts, and survey data. The researcher uploaded transcripts and identified descriptors. The demographics, as mentioned previously, were tracked using Dedoose. The software also allowed excerpts. The researcher was able to flag quotes by the participant. These quotes were used as excerpts, the smaller snippets the participant mentioned.



### **Coding Lived Experiences**

In qualitative research, coding research questions is the fundamental step towards displaying the participants' lived experiences. Coding also begins the analytical journey of the researcher while guiding the need to structure their inquiries. Coding research questions allows researchers to steer the intricacies of the qualitative data with precision and rigor. Coding highlights the participants' responses and forms the themes of this research. Based on the participants' responses, the researcher coded the sub-questions corresponding to the four main research questions used in the interviews with senior pastors, as outlined in Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7. Furthermore, codes were formulated for the inquiries directed at churchgoers, as presented in Table 8.

**Table 4 RQ 1 Forms of Digital Ministry and its Effectiveness**

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b># of Excerpts</b>	<b># of Resources</b>
Ways to communicate digitally.	Conference calls	2	2
	Live streaming	11	8
	Radio	1	1
	Social media	11	8
	Text message services	10	7
	Videoconferencing	4	4
	Website	5	5
Ways used to measure effectiveness.	The number of video clicks/views	3	3
	Amount of the offering	5	4
	Number of those who join church	1	1
	Counting attendance	4	4
	Number of comments made on live stream	2	2
	Did not gauge effectiveness	5	2
	Use collected data from sources used.	3	2
	Time of service/participation	2	2
Ineffective digital ministry.	Use tools from others	3	2
	Not effective	5	3
	Engaging the audience	1	1
	Be consistent	2	2

**Table 5 RQ2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Digital vs. In-Person Ministry.**

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b># of Excerpts</b>	<b># of Resources</b>
Disadvantages of digital ministry.	Disadvantage of Virtual	51	10
	Disadvantage of In-Person	3	1
Advantages of digital ministry.	Advantage of In-Person	10	5
	Advantage of Virtual	58	10
Are you excited about digital ministry?	Embracing Digital Ministry	17	9
	Embrace but Concerned with Digital Ministry	11	3

**Table 6 RQ3 Plans for and obstacles preventing expansion of digital ministry.**

<b>Sub Question</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b># of Excerpts</b>	<b># of Resources</b>
Change or expand digital ministry due to COVID.	Before COVID	5	4
Plans to expand the digital ministry.	Will Expand	24	10
Hinderance to implementing or expanding digital ministry.	Examples of Hinderances	26	8

**Table 7 RQ4 Developing healthy virtual community relationships.**

<b>Sub Question</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b># of Excerpts</b>	<b># of Resources</b>
Experience with the impersonal nature of technology.	Reduce or Overcome this Factor	9	6
Digital ministry to replace face-to-face communication	Replace or Supplement In-Person	9	5
	Maintain Personal Connections	26	7
Experience with two congregations.	Essentially Having Two Congregations	11	5

**Table 8 Churchgoers Lived Experiences.**

<b>Sub Question</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b># of Excerpts</b>	<b># of Resources</b>
Churchgoer Attendance Before COVID	In-Person	9	7
	Virtually	0	0
	Both	1	1
Churchgoer Attendance During COVID	In-Person	6	5
	Virtually	4	4
	Both	1	1
	Other	1	1
Churchgoer Attendance After COVID	In-Person	7	7
	Virtually	2	2
	Both	2	2
Advantage/Disadvantage of Digital Ministry	Advantage	43	10
	Disadvantage	26	9
	Other	26	8
Other	Staying Positive	52	11

Using Dedoose software exclusively, the researcher engaged in data analysis. This involved uploading 44 media clips (a combination of audio and transcripts), identifying 20 descriptors, and noting 520 excerpts categorized into 54 codes. It is crucial to understand that Dedoose represents merely one of several qualitative data analysis software alternatives, and researchers should select tools based on their requirements and preferences. To preserve the integrity of the interviews, participants were informed that the conversation was transcribed in real-time and was visible throughout the interview.

### **Results**

Digital technology has become a growing influence and an essential element that has transformed modern life, deep in structures and substructures, including the spiritual community (Bingaman, 2023). Digital technology is familiar but has become increasingly used in religious organizations to communicate with congregations. The digital ministry includes a wide range of online activities, from live streaming to blogging, from text messaging to automated telephone calls, and from being used in the church building to incorporating it in a virtual community, to name a few.

As such, this qualitative research explored the impact and effectiveness of digital ministry initiatives within religious organizations, focusing on strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. The researcher pulled from various resources, including online content analysis, scholarly textbooks and articles, and interviews with senior pastors and their congregation members. This research offers insights into the lived experiences of individuals within the spiritual community regarding the role of digital ministry.

The researcher visited some of the participants' churches' online worship services on Facebook or YouTube. The purpose of the visit was not to offer any opinion but to observe how

online services were conducted. There were noticeable differences in the services. However, this research does not include the outcome of those views as it is beyond the limitations of this study, but it may interest others who may wish to research further.

This study found that while the digital ministry has provided greater accessibility to the spiritual community, it has also had challenges operating the different platforms used and maintaining meaningful connections with those who prefer the virtual community. Overall, the results of this study contribute to the evolving implementation of various forms of digital ministry and capture the attention of others who determine there is a need for continued research of digital technology and how it shapes religious experiences within the spiritual community.

The four key themes found in the discussion section below originated from examining interview data collected from ten senior pastors. Ten churchgoers' experiences add to this research and will be included in the discussion. The themes assisted with the organization and interpretation of the set findings. The researcher used analytical and creative thinking to capture the true essence of the captured data. Determining themes is a crucial step in the research process.

Both sets of participants reside in Ohio or Michigan. Four research questions noted as themes were created, and five interview questions of churchgoers were used to gather data that address strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for forms of digital ministry in the church. The researcher asked interview questions, noted as subthemes that provided lived experiences regarding the forms of digital ministry and their effectiveness, advantages and disadvantages of digital versus in-person ministry, plans for and obstacles preventing the expansion of digital ministry, and the development of healthy virtual community relationships. The responses were then coded.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study provide a look into the lived experiences of senior pastors and churchgoers who have had experience in digital, and other ministries seeking to navigate the complexities of digital ministry may find this insightful. By understanding the challenges of administering digital ministry and opportunities associated with the digital community, readers of this study can develop strategies to leverage digital technology effectively to enhance their ministries. Additionally, while the use of digital ministry in different forms has increased significantly, this study underscores the importance of maintaining a connection in digital interactions. These elements are essential for promoting meaningful relationships and maintaining spiritual communities in the digital age.

### **Themes**

After transcribing the interviews and becoming familiar with the data, the researcher identified patterns and coded the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and notations made through the interviewing process. The following four themes were developed. To the researcher's ability, the themes are meaningful, relate to the research topic, and represent the data.

#### **First Theme: Forms of Digital Ministry and its Effectiveness**

The first research question's first theme identified the different forms of digital ministry used in the participants' church and their effectiveness. Digital ministry is a way to ensure that the Good News is shared with those inside and outside of the church building. This researcher likens digital ministry to a family reunion. The place where the reunion takes place is essential, but it's not the center of why family members come. They come to experience the love of one

another and to share time with other family members. Senior pastors' responsibility is to ensure everyone feels love and togetherness, regardless of location.

While digital ministry is an opportunity to build relations and enhance the spiritual community, it must effectively accomplish its goal. Technology can be used in many ways to share the ministry. The senior pastors' responses identified the subthemes: ways to communicate digitally, ways to measure effectiveness, and ineffective digital ministry. Nineteen codes were created from the standard comments made during the interviewing process.

### ***Ways to Communicate Digitally***

Digital ministry has increased in the church. All ten senior pastors were asked to share what form of digital ministry has been implemented in their church. Various ways were shared with the researcher.

The researcher provided examples of different forms in the interview questions when informing the participants of the definition of digital ministry used in this research. All ten senior pastors responded in diverse, innovative ways. They implemented digital ministry to enhance communication between the ministry and those in the spiritual and virtual community. The types of digital ministry given included conference calls, live streaming, radio, social media, text message services, videoconferencing, and websites. The responses created seven codes.

### ***Ways Used to Measure Effectiveness***

In every aspect of life, measuring effectiveness is essential. In Fortune 500 companies, a small business, mom-and-pop operations, one's personal life, and even church, measuring the effectiveness of the implementation of programs, life changes, policies, or operations, knowing if it is effective, is critical and will be beneficial to determine if one continues or if there is a need to make changes. For example, if a company gauges the effectiveness of new marketing and

decides it is not working and sales have not increased, then it would be beneficial to discuss why it may not work as planned. Any absence of measuring effectiveness weakens accountability and lessens the opportunity to revisit and monitor progress.

The senior pastors were asked to provide their lived experiences with measuring the effectiveness of the types of digital ministry implemented in their church. The responses formed nine codes, including not gauging in determining if the implementation has been effective. The senior pastors collectively discussed measuring effectiveness by the number of clicks or views of the video, the increase or decrease of offering, counting attendance every week, viewing trending of those who join the church, the number of comments made during a live stream, use of collected data from other sources, the length of time of participation, and using tools from co-laborers.

### ***Ineffective Digital Ministry***

There are reasons why digital ministry may not be effective within the church. The reasons for ineffectiveness may span consistently across the spiritual community, as evident by some notable reasons expressed during the interviews of the ten pastors. Three codes were formed from the consistent comments of the senior pastors. The participants shared their experiences regarding implementing digital ministry, which they had to cease because it was ineffective and did not produce the expected results.

### **Second Theme: Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual and In-person**

It is increasingly prevalent that there has been an uptick in the use of digital tools in ministries across this nation. When changes are made, there will be advantages and disadvantages. The implementation of different types of platforms may open opportunities and,



at the same time, create challenges. How the community responds to the other tools of digital ministry is essential and vital for church leaders to consider.

Not only does this theme include the experience of the senior pastors, but it was also an opportunity to fold in the experiences of the churchgoers. It was clear that thoughts, expressions, and experiences were abundant on the advantages and disadvantages of the different forms of digital ministry. For senior pastors, there were a total of six codes. With the churchgoers' responses, there were 14 codes, some duplicative of the others, a total of 20 codes. The researcher would like to point out that keeping both sets of interviews separate was intentional, which caused the duplication.

### *Senior Pastors and Churchgoers' Disadvantages to Virtual Ministry*

This was one of the top two codes of this data collection. Having the largest excerpts noted by the researcher and while in some cases the senior pastor may not have had any experience to offer for other subthemes, all ten senior pastors responded in this case. The unanimity of responses from senior pastors shows the heightened experience with disadvantages to virtual ministry. By gathering the volume of data on this topic the researcher gained valuable insights on the senior pastors' position on churchgoers who attend virtually.

The growing concern about virtual ministry became evident in the responses by the senior pastors, which was a true testament to their love for their congregation and that they were intentionally being mindful of what was not working for them. Avoiding the disadvantages of virtual services could cause problems in the personal connection and the spiritual community intended to be kept and built. Taking inventory of the possible disadvantages and coming up with solutions to address them would solidify the churchgoers who choose to worship virtually. The

senior pastors shared their experiences with virtual worship and articulated their known disadvantages. All ten senior pastors responded, and the researcher gathered 51 excerpts.

Like senior pastors, the churchgoers contributed to this subtheme by sharing their disadvantages of virtual services. Senior pastors should desire to hear the concerns of the churchgoers. As churchgoers, they are the sole recipients of implementing any form of digital ministry used to spread the Word of God and keep the congregants in the loop. If the disadvantaged's experiences, thoughts, and inputs were incorporated into the planning, it would show that their voices are heard and included in the church's purposes. There were 26 excerpts gathered from nine of the ten participants.

#### ***Senior Pastors' Disadvantages of In-Person Service***

With this subtheme, senior pastors had less to share about the disadvantages of in-person service. In fact, out of the ten senior pastors, only one responded, providing three excerpts obtained by the researcher for this study. In-person worship service is strongly supported biblically. The disadvantage was centered around the time of the public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. During the mandated closure of businesses, churches, and schools, to name a few, some still had to be in person to get the message out to those who could not be physically there by choice or the mandate. The specifics of the excerpts will be shared in the next section below.

#### ***Senior Pastors and Churchgoers' Advantages to Virtual Ministry***

Like the disadvantages of virtual ministry, this subtheme received a considerable response. All ten pastors responded with 58 excerpts gathered by the researcher. The churchgoers also shared their advantages of virtual ministry, and all ten participants offered 43 excerpts.

Both sets of participants acknowledge the advantages of virtual ministry. Many positive inputs offered by the participants included the common fact that this platform provides a connection to individuals who choose not to attend or may not be able to participate in in-person services. Typically, virtual ministry allows the Word of God to be delivered regardless of geographical barriers, as expressed by the participants. Unsurprisingly, virtual ministry will continue to be included in the church.

### ***Senior Pastors' Advantages of In-Person Service***

In-person worship service has been going on for centuries. The Holy Bible provides many examples of gathering individuals to receive the Good News. In-person worship services allow people from different walks of life to come together with one goal: to worship God and receive instructions on enhancing oneself spiritually. Churchgoers can engage with others, enjoy the live music, hear the choir sing, and share in the sacraments performed in Christian churches.

Five senior pastors responded to interview questions related to this subtheme in a few excerpts. The researcher gathered only ten familiar excerpts, but the response had so much depth. As mentioned above, the senior pastors all referred to scripture to support the advantages of in-person services.

### ***Excitement About Digital Ministry***

When an individual or company intends to implement and complete a plan, excitement is critical to successful plans. This involves the individual and others who must agree and feel a part of the plan. This subtheme asked the senior pastors about their excitement in embracing digital ministry. The second opportunity was to share if they did assume what were some of the concerns with digital ministry. Collectively, all senior pastors contributed by sharing their experiences. The researcher gathered a total of 28 excerpts for this subtheme.

### **Third Theme: Plans for and Obstacles Preventing Expansion of Digital Ministry**

Expansion is paramount for the advancement of any organization, business, or church. It is necessary to keep up with favorable current trends. In the digital world, churches must remain relevant and seek innovative ways to accomplish their mission. From meeting the needs of current churchgoers to individuals, one would not imagine reaching expansion should be at the discussion table. The Holy Bible speaks of expansion beyond the four walls of the physical church building.

When expanding a company, business, or church, there is room for obstacles to hinder or stop the desired expansion. There are several reasons why growing may become difficult. This theme brought out three subthemes and three codes. The senior pastors shared their deepest concerns regarding expanding and why it may be problematic. The commonality of the possible setbacks was identical. In this research portion, the senior pastors shared their experiences by explaining if they changed to or implemented digital ministries before COVID-19 or because of the pandemic. As mentioned, the participants shared their plans and hindrances. There was a total of three codes.

#### ***Change or Expand Digital Ministry Due to COVID-19***

The digital ministry was not created in response to the shutdown of churches due to the pandemic. Four of the ten senior pastors who responded to the interview question shared that they had already implemented different types of digital ministry. The participants expressed the need to expand their digital ministry, including adding a social media platform. The researcher highlighted five excerpts.

Digital ministry existed before COVID-19 and was being implemented in churches nationwide. There was a massive increase in the use of digital ministries as a response to

churches closing their physical doors to the public. Livestream services, Facebook posts, other social media platforms, text, emails, and automated telephone messaging already existed.

Churches explored various ways to share the Good News. COVID-19 sped up the use of multiple ways to communicate.

### ***Plans to Expand the Digital Ministry***

All ten participants spoke about how they began planning to develop or implement digital ministry due to the pandemic. As churches were forced to close their doors and stop churchgoers from coming into the building to worship, many quickly changed directions on delivering the Good News. The participants shared their strategies and plans to expand the digital ministry. This included incorporating new technologies, creating better online worship experiences, and developing activities to have churchgoers who remain virtual.

Planning the implementation of the expansion of digital ministry was critical and expressed through the participants of this research. All ten participants responded, and the researcher gathered 24 excerpts. Senior pastors shared their experience in assessing the need for and status of the digital ministry. The responses were not limited to social media and other digital online platforms but also included strategies for administering pastoral counseling, distribution of communion and other sacraments, and bible study.

### ***Hinderance of Expanding Digital Ministry***

Many experienced the heightened use of digital ministry. Churches responded to the need to continue spreading the Word of God and, in some cases, added to the digital ministry that already existed in the church. To provide churchgoers with the same experience as when conducting in-person services, the participants shared their concerns about the obstacles faced when attempting to expand.

Eight of the ten participants shared their actual and anticipated hindrances to expanding. A total of 26 excerpts were taken from this segment of the interviews. The hindrances included the need for more current staff capacity, the inability to add to staff, funding to maintain or enhance, and the need for technological infrastructure. All participants expressed their acceptance of change by churchgoers accustomed to in-person services. The expansion of digital ministry calls for expertise in the technical world, viable resources, and time. Not only did the participants share hindrances from external factors, but the vulnerability shown by the participants as they shared their factors was a critical hindrance that needed to be immediately addressed. This portion of the interviews became very emotional for some as they shared their experiences. The hindrances faced by the participants stifled the passion for giving churchgoers the best. Both the passion for and the disappointments were the center of this subtheme.

#### **Fourth Theme: Developing Healthy Virtual Community Relationships**

Relationships come in different forms: family, romantic, friendly, professional, spiritual, and community. Relationships can be healthy or unhealthy. The need for healthy relationships in the church is paramount. Healthy relationships foster a sense of belonging. Senior pastors are the tone-setters in determining if relations within the church are healthy or unhealthy. Within the spiritual community, the senior pastors and leaders must display a type of love known in Greek as *agape* (ἀγάπη), which refers to unconditional, selfless love (Ip, 2022). Senior pastors showing *agape* love do so by serving the churchgoers without expecting reciprocation.

It is easier to build strong, healthy relations when you are face-to-face. The participants shared their experiences with two congregations, an in-person and virtual spiritual community. Three subthemes, the impersonal nature of technology, digital ministry replacing face-to-face communication, and experience with two congregations, were spread across four codes and 55

excerpts. Building healthy relationships in the virtual community can be huge to the ministry's success, but more importantly, the possibility of enhancing the spiritual formation of churchgoers, including those a senior pastor may never physically meet.

### ***The Impersonal Nature of Technology***

Technology is a tool that can keep individuals connected rather than physically. For example, Facetime on the computer connects two individuals who are not in the same place. A mother using Facetime to talk to a son may feel the love but cannot feel the hug that a son would give. Text on the telephone keeps individuals connected, but you do not hear the voice; you only see the words. You can have an entire conversation with multiple people by texting through a cell phone. Using this method, you cannot see the body language or the smile on the face of another. The acronym LOL is used to indicate that you are laughing out loud. Technology has taken away the sound of that laughter; you only read that someone is laughing. Technology takes out physical connections and inserts connections through a technical tool. Senior pastors shared their experience with the impersonal nature of technology and how to reduce or overcome this factor. Six senior pastors had similar experiences, and the nine excerpts were logged.

### ***Digital Ministry is Replacing Face-to-Face Communication***

Face-to-face interactions have been the norm when it comes to worship services in the church. Senior pastors shared how you would have opportunities to see a churchgoer on average two to three times weekly. Face-to-face interactions build strong communities and create a sense of belonging. Senior pastors can see, touch, hug, and discern while in the presence of churchgoers.

However, digital ministry replaces face-to-face communication but keeps the avenue to continue sharing the ministry with virtually active ones. Participating senior pastors shared their

experience that digital ministry replaces or supplements in-person interactions. They shared ways to continue effectively getting the Word of God out to those in the virtual spiritual community. A good portion of the responses centered around maintaining personal connections. There were 26 common excerpts taken from seven of the senior pastors who responded.

### *Experience With Two Congregations*

Pastoring two congregations can be overwhelming to some but not others. The closure of church doors increased the need to enhance the digital ministry by including the option to view worship services online. As the pandemic began to be less aggressive, doors began to open, but the option to remain virtual remained. This unique opportunity to spread the Good News in in-person and virtual service created two congregations. The needs are different. The effort to keep both engaged is additional.

Some churches are known for having multiple worship services on one day. The early service was structured to keep the more seasoned, older saints engaged, as often referred to. Then, there was the morning service, which appeared more contemporary. While the Word remains the same, the delivery may be different. With virtual worship, the senior pastors share their experience with having two congregations, and the needs differ. Senior pastors had to learn to plan accordingly and ensure the in-person and virtual communities continued to enhance their spiritual journey.

### **Research Questions Responses**

Digital ministry has become an integral and dominant tool for spreading the Good News in this high-tech world. Various ways exist to communicate and engage with those outside the church building. With the need to continue enhancing the spiritual formation of believers and



building a strong faith community, digital ministry is an advantageous way of completing the mission.

The researcher established how technology would be used to begin the virtual interviews with the participants. The researcher defined digital ministry as using technology for church ministry, including streaming services, social media, blogs, texts and emails, telecommunications, videoconferencing, and church websites. One way churches establish efficient communication outside of the church building is to ensure that intelligent technologies are consistently recognized because they are crucial (Haddad, 2024).

As expressed in the definition above, which did not include all types, social media has risen and is the most talked about in participant interviews. Churches and other religious organizations have used platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. These platforms allow reaching well beyond the four walls of the church. It will enable senior pastors to share the Good News and converse with churchgoers and those who attend. In addition, through social media meetings and Bible study, new member orientation can occur.

Below are the research questions and the responses.

### **Research Question 1**

**RQ1.** What forms of digital ministry have senior pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective?

The researcher began the interviews by providing a clear definition of digital ministry to the senior pastors, aiming to gain insight into their practices and what they have implemented in their church. Senior pastors from Ohio and Michigan demonstrated a broad range of digital ministry used to connect with their churchgoers and communities. The senior pastors used text messaging, offering updates and inspirational quotes to live-streamed worship services, offering

the churchgoers the opportunity to engage with the church remotely. Additional digital ministry types are listed in the next table.

**Table 9 RQ1 Subtheme 1 Response**

<b>Digital Ministry Type</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Conference Calls	SP1, SP7
Live Streaming	SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP7, SP8, SP9
Radio	SP6
Social media	SP1, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8, SP9, SP10
Text Message Services	SP1, SP2, SP4, SP6, SP7, SP8, SP10
Video communication	SP2, SP5, SP6, SP7
Websites	SP1, SP5, SP7, SP8, SP10

The above table shows the seven types of digital ministry tools used in the church. The senior pastors were asked to share their experiences and how they were utilizing digital ministry. It was determined that the senior pastors used various digital ministry tools to communicate with their churchgoers. These methods are used to reach out to those beyond the physical bricks and mortar of the church.

The senior pastors mentioned three types. Those were live streaming, social media, and text message services. Nine out of the ten pastors expressed their experience with live streaming. Senior pastors can use this live streaming to broadcast their sermons, Bible study, and other programming online for churchgoers who wish to participate virtually. SP4 referred to this sharing with the virtual community as a cyber sanctuary. All senior pastors responded that their services are posted weekly. The social media platform used varied, although YouTube rose above others like Facebook. SP4, SP3, and SP2 record the live services and upload them to YouTube sometime after service. One senior pastor specifically mentioned posting the next day. Other social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. SP3 indicated that this is used to inspire the congregation and others. These platforms are also used to announce upcoming events being held at the church.

SP3 used the social media platforms SP1, SP2, SP4, SP6, SP7, SP8, and SP10, which mentioned using text message services to send their churchgoers announcements and reminders and included inspirational messages. This method of communication provides a direct and immediate way to connect with churchgoers. Text messaging is also accessible as many people carry their cell phones everywhere. Text messaging is evident in the digital ministry, where the message can reach so many people simultaneously with just a click of a button.

SP6 was the only senior pastor who mentioned radio to reach the local community, sharing their sermons and Bible study. The senior pastor noted that this option remains because some churchgoers do not have internet access and are uncomfortable with frequent social media use. Radio broadcasting provides access to those who may not have access to digital platforms but want to hear the Good News from their leader. This highlights that senior pastors should consider the churchgoers when implementing digital ministry. Senior pastors should remain flexible in digital ministry implementation. SP6 is meeting the spiritual needs of his churchgoers and those who listen regardless of technological capabilities.

Regarding video conferencing, SP2, SP5, SP6, and SP7 shared during their interview that they implemented this form of digital ministry to include virtual counseling sessions, pastor care, board meetings, staff meetings, and even one-on-one meetings with churchgoers. SP6 and SP7 mentioned that they found this beneficial for the churchgoer and the senior pastor as they meet anywhere and do not have to be in the exact location. The lived experiences of four senior pastors highlight the flexibility and accessibility of video conferencing for both the churchgoer and the senior pastors. Video conferencing enables senior pastors to provide support and care to their churchgoers, expressing that by looking at them on the screen.

SP1, SP5, SP7, SP8, and SP10 indicated they have church websites. The senior pastors spoke highly of websites. SP1 said they will always have a website because it reaches more than churchgoers. The website is used to house the business and the ministry of the church. SP7 has implemented all the types of digital ministry mentioned by the other senior pastors. It was clear that the senior pastors recognized how important it is to get the Word of God out to others. During these interviews, the senior pastors emphasized that their top goal was maintaining connectivity with their churchgoers, even if they were not physically in the building.

**Table 10 RQ1 Subtheme 2 Response**

<b>Ways Used to Measure Efficacy</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Number of views/clicks	SP1, SP4, SP10
Amount of offering	SP2, SP5, SP8, SP9
Counting attendance	SP4, SP8, SP9, SP10
Number of those who join the church	SP5
Number of comments posted	SP4, SP9

In this subtheme, senior pastors shared ways to measure the effectiveness of their implemented digital ministry methods. The participants identified five ways the church measures efficacy. The top two methods mentioned were offering and counting attendance.

SP2, SP5, SP8, and SP9 indicated they could determine if a digital ministry method was effective by the amount collected during the offering. This metric tracks the total financial contribution from the churchgoers; the senior pastors said they offer electronic payment for those who attend virtually. Cashapp, a financial services platform that allows senior pastors to send and receive money electronically; PayPal, a simple, secure online payment method; and Givelify, a platform that facilitates the sending and receiving of funds, were among the methods discussed. SP2, SP5, and SP8 spoke more in-depth about Givelify, indicating that this method provides the church with a landing page that can be customized per the church's desire.

SP4, SP8, SP9, and SP10 mentioned attendance as their method to determine efficacy. More specifically, attendance in the virtual community. Pastors could determine the amount of traffic on their social media pages. They could also see the number of participants attending workshops, training, Bible study, and auxiliary meetings.

The next highest mention was determining the number of views on social media. SP1, SP4, and SP10 felt that tracking the number of views on their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram social media platforms was critical. They collectively mentioned that many view counts indicated effectiveness, showing that individuals are interested in the ministry. In the final mention of this question by SP10, it was stated that the senior pastor realizes that people can come into the service virtually and their presence is counted. Still, they can also leave and join another service or be counted but only sometimes participate fully in service.

This same set of senior pastors mentioned counting the number of likes. The like buttons on social networking pages, such as Facebook, allow users to express their likes on content posts. This happens with photos, videos, statements, and updates, to name a few. The senior pastors highlighted this option on the different platforms, considering it equal to the engagement level. The more clicks, the more engagement appears.

SP4 and SP9 indicated they measure effectiveness by the number of comments the viewer makes on the posted content. SP4 said that while they cannot view comments while they are in church, it demonstrates that the viewers are participating in the service. SP4 also indicated they review the comments later in the week to get feedback from the attendees. SP9 finds the comments as a place to determine if what is being preached is effective. SP9 assigns churchgoers to attend to the comments and replies to keep engagement and participation high during service.

SP5 was the only senior pastor who measured effectiveness on the number of people who turned their lives over to Jesus Christ and became saved. This same pastor mentioned that confessing one's sin, committing one's life to Jesus, and joining the ministry were clear, significant outcomes of digital ministry. SP5 demonstrates digital ministry's transformative potential that makes spiritual growth and discipleship possible. It is an example of how senior pastors should view digital ministry, not as a way to get the Good News out, but as a way to win souls to Christ.

Lastly, SP3, SP6, and SP7 directly mentioned they have yet to consider measuring their digital ministry's effectiveness. This portion of the study was the most vulnerable as the senior pastors shared with the researcher what they had not been doing when determining effectiveness. They acknowledged the importance of implementing the measuring tool and would be willing to do so. SP1, SP2, SP8, and SP9 shared that although they could articulate measuring methods, building on different tools to measure their digital ministries would be a priority. SP3 shared his remorse for not including how the churchgoers received digital ministry. SP3 took a long pause and then expressed their gratitude.

This question revealed possible growth opportunities and was widely accepted by the senior pastors. The importance of measuring the effectiveness of digital ministry is wider than its functionality. Still, it speaks to ensuring churchgoers are spiritually nurtured even when they cannot reach the church's physical location. Digital ministry is essential, and when it comes to digital platforms, senior pastors and leaders must understand how this can impact the individual and the church. Senior pastors should be sure that the Good News is not only reaching others but also reaching others outside of the building and expanding beyond the local geographical area of the church.

**Table 11 RQ1 Subtheme 3 Response**

<b>Ineffective Digital Ministry</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Not effective	SP3, SP4, SP5
Engaging the audience	SP1

The table above displays the responses to subtheme #3. This question allowed senior pastors to discuss what they experienced as ineffective digital ministry methods and whether they discontinued them. Beginning with SP4, which had much to add in discussing the ineffectiveness of the digital ministry methods tried. The pastor indicated that they tried several applications that were not successful. The pastor shared their experience of failing with some of the online streaming applications. The pastor stated, “We didn’t know what we were doing.” The senior pastor indicated that they told their staff, “We’re not doing that anymore.” Due to the lack of capacity and tech-savvy, the church did not continue with those applications.

SP5’s lived experience brings to light the dynamic nature of digital ministry and how adapting to it is essential. The senior pastor utilized YouTube as a broadcasting platform to deliver the Word of God. However, when it was noted that there was little engagement, the senior pastor decided that it was ineffective. SP5 attributed this ineffectiveness to the church only using the broadcasting platform once a week. The senior pastor discontinued YouTube and moved the ministry to the Facebook platform. The pastor did not indicate that they were using that platform more frequently.

SP3 shared, “We had a connection to YouTube, but I haven’t used it yet.” The pastor is not interested in digital ministry, specifically social media platforms. Addressing the digital ministry tools that are not effective is important, and the senior pastors were comfortable with stopping any implementation of any ineffective digital ministry. The servant-leaders were willing to try any course to assist in the spiritual formation of those who chose or could not come to the church building.

## Research Question 2

**RQ2.** What do senior pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry?

**Table 12 RQ2 Subtheme 1 Response**

<b>Disadvantages of Digital Ministry</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Disadvantage of Virtual	SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8, SP9, SP10, CG2, CG3, CG4, CG5, CG6, CG7, CG8, CG9, CG10
Disadvantage of In-Person	SP2

The above table shows that the participants had many reasons for feeling that digital ministry had disadvantages. All ten senior pastors and all but one of the ten churchgoers shared their lived experiences. The churchgoer who did not respond stated they had no reason to add to the discussion.

Many participants mentioned that live-streamed worship services could quickly be interrupted by distractions from where the services are being viewed. CG5 shared that if the services are long because they are home, they can be distracted by the need to clean up or do something because the service is too long. CG7 indicated they become lazy and do not stay engaged with service because they are not physically there. SP10, unaware of what the churchgoers responded, felt that digital ministry could make someone comfortable, and they started doing other things, and the service became background noise. SP10 also mentioned, “This is not the way that Christ meant it to be.”

The major disadvantage of digital ministry among senior pastors was the impersonal nature of conducting virtual worship. Virtual worship takes away from individuals worshipping in church services in the physical. SP3 and CG7 referred to the Holy Scripture that speaks to forsaking the assembly, “...not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but



encouraging one another, and all the more as you see, the Day drawing near” (ESV, Hebrews 10:25).

SP8 shared the same sentiments as CG4, expressing that individuals who stay in the virtual community will lose interest and will not be committed to the church and the vision. SP4 mentioned that members would be engaged until they are not engaged. The senior pastor said there are a lot of loose ends, and not being physically in a building can cause one to turn to them quickly.

When asked about the disadvantages of in-person, SP2 was the only one to share in detail their experience. One disadvantage referenced the pandemic outbreak. The senior pastor stated that being in person for service does run the risk of spreading a virus. This pastor noted that the possibility was there before COVID-19, but this pastor is more conscious of it every day since. Lastly, SP2 stated that in-person was a disadvantage because it set up a culture in which worshipping God and spreading the Word of God were only done in church. SP2 said, “We have gotten so caught up in people coming to church we forgot about those who will never come through church doors.”

**Table 13 RQ2 Subtheme 2 Response**

<b>Advantages of Digital Ministry</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Advantage of In-person	SP1, SP4, SP5, SP7, SP9,
Advantage of Virtual	SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8, SP9, SP10, CG1, CG2, CG3, CG4, CG5, CG6, CG7, CG8, CG9, CG10

Five senior pastors weighed heavily in sharing their experiences about how in-person worship service is advantageous. The top experience shared was the sense of fellowship among those who attended physically. This time in church services provides face-to-face interactions, and there is a time when churchgoers can hug and socialize with other churchgoers. SP9 highly

recommended in-person services because they felt they could touch the churchgoer, and the churchgoer could touch them.

The common scripture used among the responding senior pastors, “I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” (ESV, Psalm 122:1). The opportunity to gather in one place was critical to enhancing personal connections. It builds on the need to incorporate socialization among humans. SP5 believed that being in person makes stronger communities among those growing spiritually. SP1 used new membership classes as an excellent example of why in-person classes are beneficial. The senior pastor said that seeing someone new will open an opportunity for the unique individuals to become closer and grant familiarity among new families joining the church.

SP4 shared the importance of connection in their response to this question. The participant acknowledged that new individuals who came to the church building whom they did not know. The senior pastor mentioned that they could connect and pray for and with them because they attended in-person service. Senior pastors mentioned the scripture, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For when two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (ESV, Matthew 18:19-20).

As it relates to the advantages of virtual worship, all senior pastors and churchgoers shared their experiences with virtual space. This question brought on a lengthy sharing of experiences. The senior pastors not only shared the advantages of virtual worship for the benefit of the churchgoers but also shared some benefits for themselves.

The senior pastors either directly or indirectly referred to the Holy Scripture that supports going beyond the four walls and spreading the Word of God. The Holy Scripture states, “And the

master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.’ (ESV, Luke 14:23). SP1 mentioned that digital ministry reaches people you may never meet in person but have become a part of the spiritual community. SP2, SP3, and SP4 similarly shared the same experience. The pastors stated that you can have people scrolling through social media platforms and stop and become involved; we know we are reaching people from around the globe because they are sending in donations; thousands of people are watching across the country, respectfully. SP6 mentioned having family who would never enter a church but attend every posted worship service and Bible study.

SP1, SP8, and SP9 shared in their lived experience that they favor digital ministry because they can speak with many churchgoers outside of the church. They also discussed how convenient it is to communicate with their churchgoer from home. It was determined that the senior pastors can meet virtually with the team or churchgoers, and when the meeting is over, they do not have to drive. They are already home.

Churchgoers shared their lived experiences with the advantages of virtual worship. CG5 shared that the advantage of virtual worship is that they enjoy the service without interruption. CG5 indicated they want and prefer going to a building to worship God and to be with others in service. However, virtual services allow this churchgoer to enjoy service without being asked to do something in the church while the service is in progress. The churchgoer goes on to share that it is good to serve the people who are present. Still, because this person must watch and ensure others are comfortable, safe, or attentive, they cannot enjoy the service themselves if someone requires attention. They cannot hear the preached Word because they focus on serving the people in their role instead of being a part of the service as an attendee. CG5 shared they were amazed

to be in service and fully participate but could only do so as virtual attendees. Striking to the researcher, the same sentiments were shared by CG1 and CG4.

**Table 14 RQ2 Subtheme 3 Response**

<b>Excited About Digital Ministry</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Embracing Digital Ministry	SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8, SP9
Embracing but Concerned with Digital Ministry	SP1, SP5, SP6

In this part of the research, the senior pastors were asked to share their experiences with being excited about and their concerns with the digital ministry. The researcher noticed the willingness of the senior pastors to share their attitudes toward digital ministry. SP4 and SP5 showed a high level of excitement during their interview. Both expressed their love for digital ministry and acknowledged that it could take them as pastors into the homes of those who may never come to the church building. SP2 contributed their excitement to digital ministry because the pastor felt it coincides with the Bible about going out into the highways and byways and compelling men to come. The statement was about Matthew 22:9-11.

The senior pastors also shared their concerns with the digital ministry. SP1 said, “A lot of what we see is a circus and not ministry.” The pastor did not say much after that, and the researcher did not ask clarifying questions to ensure consistency throughout all interviews. While SP5 was excited, as mentioned above, they felt that digital ministry makes people lazy and would not believe they need to apply to the Scripture about fellowship and worship.

### **Research Question 3**

**RQ3.** Do senior pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion?

**Table 15 RQ3 Subtheme 1 Response**

<b>Change or Expand Digital Ministry</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Before COVID-19	SP1, SP4, SP5, SP6

Senior pastors gave their lived experience of digital ministry and described what was in place before the pandemic or whether they were forced to make some changes. SP5 mentioned they had no social media footprint, SP4 said they only had one camera and went live without knowing what they were doing, and SP1 mentioned they did social media. Still, it needed to be more consistent, and SP6 said they were already using Facebook Live.

**Table 16 RQ3 Subtheme 2 Response**

<b>Plans to Expand Digital Ministry</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Will Expand	SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8, SP9, SP10

All senior pastors shared their intention to expand digital ministry, from having more presence on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to starting up podcasts. Some pastors mentioned changing the lighting and enhancing the equipment. SP4 stressed the importance of improving sound. SP10 wished to expand the digital ministry to offer training and teaching opportunities.

**Table 17 RQ3 Subtheme 3 Response**

<b>Hindrances to Implementing or Expanding</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Examples of Hindrances	SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8,

The senior pastors mentioned several hindrances in their interviews. Just an example from those who responded: SP1 does not have enough volunteers, SP2 does digital ministry from home, and procrastination becomes a hindrance, SP3 volunteers who are willing but not capable, SP4 the cost keeps them from implementing the level of excellence they desire, and SP5, SP7, and SP8 also mentioned the cost. Overall, the cost of implementing digital ministry can vary depending on what the church wants or needs to include. Smaller churches may not have the financial resources to implement and maintain any digital ministry implemented.

#### Research Question 4

**RQ4.** How do senior pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction?

**Table 18 RQ4 Subtheme 1 Response**

<b>Experience with Impersonal Nature of Technology</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Reduce or Overcome this Factor	SP1, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP7, SP8

The impersonal nature of technology exists. Churches will need to find creative ways how to keep connections with those who choose to worship virtually. Relationship building is typical in the workplace and could serve as an example of how to do so in the spiritual community—perhaps by organizing smaller church or prayer circles and building small online community groups. SP6 suggested developing healthy virtual communities. If the senior pastors are servant-leaders and transformational leaders, learning to reduce and overcome the impersonal nature would be wise. The respondents to this question exemplified the willingness to put forward a plan to be inclusive.

**Table 19 RQ4 Subtheme 2 Response**

<b>Replacing Face-to-Face Communication</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Replace or Supplement In-Person	SP1, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP8
Maintain Personal Connections	SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5, SP6, SP8

Overall, the participants indicated that digital ministry cannot replace but offer a choice. SP4 suggested that the pandemic forced churches to do what it was already headed towards increasing digital ministry. SP5 mentioned churches that didn't put in an option their church closed. SP1 said that digital ministry is an excellent supplement to attending worship service.

Digital ministry does not replace in-person worship because some desire both. However, digital ministry should complement and even enhance the church's ministry. SP8 gave the example of a patient seeing a physician, and now, they can visit the physician from their home.

The device did not replace the physician's need; it just changed the location of both. Digital ministry can offer an opportunity to receive information but cannot fully replace it.

There is a need to maintain personal connections with both the virtual and in-person attendees. SP4 indicated they go into the communities once a quarter to stay connected. SP5 has decided to do activities once a month, and SP2 engages with virtual attendees, answering their questions while online. SP1 offers advice to engage intentionally indicating that others will see and appreciate the connection.

**Table 20 RQ4 Subtheme 3 Response**

<b>Experience with Two Congregations</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
Essentially Having Two Congregations	SP1, SP3, SP4, SP6, SP8

Two congregations exist today; some churches have services at two different times on the same day. SP8 mentions that they deliver the sermon the same way as if the spiritual attendees were physical. SP1 was decisive in their response, indicating that there is only one Church and that they will never look at the two as separate congregations. While listening to the responses and reading the data, the researcher noticed that despite the definition of digital ministry, live streaming was often mentioned, and no other forms of digital ministry were mentioned. Further research can ensure that senior pastors know all forms of digital ministry and its effectiveness.

### **Evaluation of the Research Design**

The researcher selected a qualitative phenomenological design to determine senior pastors and churchgoers' lived experiences with digital ministry and its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. While threats are typically included in the comprehensive SWOT analysis framework, the decision was made by this researcher to omit them from this study. The researcher intended to focus on the first three components. Threats could be an area for further research, as explained in Chapter 5. A research design is an essential aspect of any study, and

this researcher was seeking to explore the lived experiences associated with a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher structured four clear and well-defined research questions. Ensuring that the research questions were relevant to the chosen topic was essential. The researcher's questions assisted in determining the four themes for this study. Three open-ended questions accompanied each research question. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their lived experiences of digital ministry without interruption from the researcher. The advantage of using open-ended questions is that they take away definitive correct or incorrect answers. This open-ended interview technique fosters an atmosphere of comfort and ease among the participants. Having a setting that benefits the interviewee encourages a free expression of their experiences and perspectives regarding the subject matter.

Despite open-ended questions being a valuable tool for qualitative research, some disadvantages came with this study. One notable drawback to open-ended questions is the time consumed analyzing the information. Responses to open-ended questions were longer and more detailed than closed-ended ones, requiring more time and effort to analyze. Additionally, ensuring the gathered data accurately represented the interviewee's responses was time-consuming. Open-ended questions should not be considered if there is an unwillingness to pay close attention to the details.

The researcher included 20 participants, ten pastors, and ten churchgoers. This choice was advantageous as it involved those closely associated with the research matter. However, patience was required, as the researcher had to wait for potential participants to accept the invitation, with uncertainty regarding their responses. It was essential to have interview questions that played a role in directing the participants' contributions.



The researcher used Dedoose, a cloud-based research software that assists with data analysis. Being unfamiliar with the tool, the researcher was extremely impressed and highly recommended its use. To tackle the uncertainties of the tool, the researcher viewed a series of YouTube training guides led by Dr. Philip Adu. This researcher found the software complex, and it was only because of the YouTube training that it was possible to use. Dedoose analyzes and interprets text, audio, and video data. Users can establish codes to categorize the responses. Exciting enough, the tool operates on a subscription basis and has different cost levels. If one has a subscription, it is based on the time the tool is used rather than a monthly fee. Therefore, they will not be charged if a researcher does not log in during a billing cycle. Additionally, the information gathered using this research tool is stored and can be easily assessed by those with valid usernames and passwords.

In conclusion, in this chapter, the researcher formed themes and subthemes using the data analyzed. The researcher shared the living experiences of the 20 participants who reside in Ohio or Michigan. Interviews were conducted on either Microsoft Teams or Zoom videoconferencing. The responses of the ten pastors and ten churchgoers formed four themes and fourteen subthemes. Those four most influential themes included 1) forms of digital ministry and their effectiveness, 2) advantages and disadvantages of virtual and in-person, 3) plans for and obstacles preventing expansions of digital ministry, and 4) developing healthy virtual community relationships.

The participants were free to respond to the open-ended questions, showed excitement and interest in the topic, and some left, expressing how the interview had them thinking about going back and being more effective and intentional in digital ministry. The senior pastors shared their hearts for the ministry and their church family. The one shared sentiment was that each

articulated how they were in positions to serve their congregation and beyond, making them leaders and servant-leaders. The implementation and enhancement of digital ministry are different ways to share the Word of God; it was in the hearts of all who participated and expressed through their experiences.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS**

### **Overview**

In the initial four chapters, the researcher explored and presented the Research Concern, Literature Review, Research Methodology, and Methodological Analysis of Findings related to digital ministry in the church. These chapters were instrumental in identifying the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities associated with digital ministry. In this last chapter, the researcher will provide a conclusion to this qualitative research. This chapter will include the research purpose, questions, conclusions, implications, applications, limitations, and further research. The researcher will write a summary to close the chapter and the research.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore through research how senior pastors who are servant-leaders and their churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches as they attempt to develop healthy virtual relationships that maintain personal connections. In research, Barna Group (2020) noted that seventy-three percent of pastors indicated their church doors were closed during the pandemic. While thirty-eight percent of the groups stopped meeting altogether, fifty-three percent turned to digital tools to remain connected with each other and the ministry. This research defines digital ministry as using technological means for church ministry, including streaming services, social media, blogs, texts and emails, telecommunications (video calling), and church websites. This phenomenological study follows Greenleaf's (1977) servant-leadership theory, which points out the concept of leaders as servants first.

## Research Questions

The following research questions set up the foundational framework for this phenomenological study.

**RQ1.** What forms of digital ministry have senior pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective?

**RQ2.** What do senior pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry?

**RQ3.** Do senior pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion?

**RQ4.** How do senior pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction?

## Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This section of the dissertation will share the research conclusions, implications, and applications. The three mentioned are critical components of the dissertation. The research conclusions will reveal the key findings of the research. The researcher will share again the research questions, provide a summarized conclusion, and support with lived experiences that emerged from the research interviews.

The research implications will discuss the broader implications of the findings. The researcher will ensure that these implications reflect the theory of this dissertation and will provide highlights of the findings, offering some potential areas to consider for further research. By pointing out key findings and suggesting potential areas for further research, the implications section will add to the conversation about leadership.

The application will take the findings and share how they are relevant to current world events. The researcher will offer how the findings could be considered in the decision-making

and implementation of digital ministry in the church. Based on the participants' lived experiences, the researcher will ensure that the applications are specific, realistic, and doable.

## **Research Conclusions**

### **Research Conclusions One – RQ1**

Research question one asked: What forms of digital ministry have senior pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective? This research question concluded that senior pastors and churchgoers use several digital ministry tools. The digital tools expressed in this research were conference calls, live streaming, radio, social media, text message services, videoconferencing, and websites. These tools were used either before the COVID-19 pandemic or were established to respond to the pandemic that caused a mandate to close the church's doors.

The purpose was to continue spreading the Word of God to churchgoers and those forced into a virtual community. This aligns with Wise's (2014) assertion regarding the fundamental importance of communication. According to Wise, communication should not be seen as just a skill or tool, but it is a natural aspect of human nature. He suggests that communication is inherent to our existence. Therefore, despite the doors closing the need to continue communicating the Good News is essential and is the fabric of the church that should be effective.

The senior pastors shared their lived experiences in determining the effectiveness of the chosen digital platforms used by the church. Digital ministry can effectively reach churchgoers and those who do not attend church. The message of God through digital ministries can stretch beyond the four walls of the church, as mentioned by both senior pastors and churchgoers. However, the data received prove that there is room to improve in determining whether the

church's digital ministry tool is effective. More than half of the senior pastors mentioned they would go back and strategize on how to determine digital ministry effectiveness. Three of the senior pastors stated they did not, nor did they consider, putting in place procedures to assess digital ministry effectiveness.

While senior pastors expressed receiving positive feedback from their live-streamed services, there was not enough data to show any best practices to determine effectiveness, specifically surveying the churchgoers or those who frequent the established platforms. Receiving feedback from churchgoers is a valuable tool to understand the needs, preferences, what works, what is not working, and their lived experience with digital ministry. By intentionally asking churchgoers for their feedback, churches build a sense of ownership and engagement among the churchgoers. The digital ministry only accomplishes its goal if implemented effectively.

### **Research Conclusion Two – RQ2**

Research question two asked: What do senior pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry? The conclusion of this research question determined senior pastors and churchgoers provided many advantages and disadvantages of both digital and in-person ministry. The responses were based on the participants' advantages and disadvantages. Before sharing the overarching conclusion, the researcher noted that despite having defined digital ministry tools, all participants, senior pastors, and churchgoers spoke more about live streaming as the sole tool of digital ministry.

Campbell (2020) addressed the shift in the mindset of church leaders in terms of the Internet being a viable tool for Christian worship and communication. As a result of external uncontrolled circumstances like the pandemic, it forced church leaders, specifically senior

pastors, to reconsider the traditional way of sharing the Word of God and had them embracing digital platforms. The Internet's potential to allow individuals to worship outside of the typical bricks-and-mortar adds to fostering spiritual connections and formation. He spoke volumes when he indicated that church leaders were forced to think again.

Regarding digital ministry, the advantage was the ability to reach churchgoers and others outside of the four walls of the church and even outside of where the church building is located. The disadvantage is the need to share the ministry with others face-to-face. It was a resounding conclusion that digital ministry impedes the physical and social part of ministry. Regarding in-person ministry, there was a common mention that by being present, you can have a better experience being in the church rather than watching via various platforms. The disadvantages of in-person were few. The participants determined that being in person may spread sickness, and those in roles of serving others may not be able to participate in service fully. The researcher noted that all participants shared during their interviews that despite the advantages and disadvantages, they preferred being physically in the church.

### **Research Conclusion Three – RQ3**

Research question three asked: Do senior pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion? Based on the data gathered from the interview, most senior pastors intend to expand their use of digital ministry. The need to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ beyond the local church drives the intent to expand. The senior pastors acknowledged that digital ministry exists and that the need to do so is essential to building the spiritual community. The acknowledgment of digital ministry by senior pastors signifies that many will learn how to live a Christ-like life.

The acknowledgment by senior pastors that the digital ministry exists is in line with the broader recognition with church leadership globally. The senior pastors recognizing this aligns with Hutchings' (2017) characterization of the online church as a community of believers. These online believers participate in worship and receive biblical teachings by participating through digital platforms. By embracing digital ministry, there is an extension of a reach to churchgoers who remain connected spiritually in the virtual space.

As suggested in the literature review, spiritual formation is the essence of the Christian Community. The church is intended to carry out the mission set by Christ for this world. The data collected from the participants supports Wilhoit and Willard (2022), who stressed that spiritual formation is the path to flourishing in Christ.

However, this set of senior pastors were not hesitant to share that there is a need for more financial resources to implement the best technology and more knowledgeable staff to handle the logistics once established. This set of participants lacked this required skill in their current church overall. Servant-leader pastors who wish to transform the way the church is now could benefit from future research that could explore strategies for overcoming financial and lack of capacity obstacles.

#### **Research Conclusion Four – RQ4**

Research question four asked the following: How do senior pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction? Based on the responses of the senior pastors, the conclusion is that there are two types of congregations: virtual and in-person. Virtual churchgoers are those who are involved in the church through digital platforms. These include but are not limited to, live-stream worship services, inspirational messages sent via email, or discussions online.



Churchgoers who attend virtually may live locally or in different geographical locations. Perhaps the virtual churchgoer cannot participate in church physically because of mobility issues or does not have the means to get to the church but still desires to worship the Lord. Nine of the ten pastors discussed wanting to connect with those in the virtual community by creating small group sessions and building a team of leaders to go out to the small teams and make a sense of belonging to the church. However, the senior pastors expressed that including all in the virtual space is impossible, so they connect in other ways. Examples include engaging those in the virtual community in the comment section or chatrooms, meeting with individuals on video conferencing, and connecting via text. The senior pastors collectively agree that while it is not a preference for some, another set of individuals prefers virtual. As a result, effective ways to develop healthy virtual community relationships must exist.

## **Implications**

### **Research Implications**

The primary purpose of this research study was to gather data regarding digital ministry in the church and determine its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. This research section will share practical, theoretical, policy, and education implications. The research explored the lived experiences of senior pastors who implemented digital ministry and their churchgoers. Ultimately, it's determined that digital ministry is here to stay. There are options for individuals to attend services in person or virtually. The COVID-19 pandemic left pastors no choice but to enhance the use of digital ministry. A concept not accepted by all, but because they are servant-leaders, they look to provide the teachings of God outside the four walls. This section will provide a detailed explanation of the implications found in this research.

## **Practical Implications**

The research's results had some practical implications. They revealed that each participant is using some digital ministry to go beyond the four walls of the church. The digital ministry tools share the Good News with the churchgoers. The senior pastors showed themselves as servant leaders, wanting to be instrumental in saving people and helping in the spiritual formation of those involved with the church.

Another practical implication is embracing digital technology, which is here to stay. The senior pastors expressed the need to embrace digital technology and ensure the tools are helpful. Therefore, senior pastors should ensure that the church intentionally invests in digital ministry and maintains it to carry out the mission and aspirations of the church.

## **Theoretical Implications**

It was clear that the senior pastors serve as servant-leaders. The common foundation of the participants' responses was to serve and ensure those in person and virtually grow spiritually. A particular statement that rounds up the mention of others came from SP10,

“I really believe that it was designed by God that we had to go into the space [digital]. So, I think that’s an advantage, too, that God pushed us where we should have been. We should have been in Matthew 28:18-20. However, we were deciding who was going to do it. That was the missionary auxiliary’s job, that was to do evangelism. No, it’s everybody’s job.”

The senior pastors' genuine responses, conveyed through their passionate tones and resolute demeanor when discussing their commitment to supporting and serving churchgoers, reflect Greenleaf's (1977) stance that servant leadership is a priority for leaders. It was evident that the senior pastors carried the critical tools of being a great servant leader. Greenleaf introduced the idea that authentic leadership comes from a desire to serve others. The researcher

includes a servant-leadership framework to learn about the experiences of senior pastors and churchgoers who have implemented digital ministry.

The researcher looked to see how senior pastors effectively serve their churchgoers through digital ministry. Servant-leadership encompasses the ethical norms and principles needed as you interact with one another; they are a significant model theologically, socially, and culturally and can foster a bond and loyalty between the followers and the one whom they follow. By researching with servant-leadership in mind, the senior pastors could share how their implementation of digital ministry serves the spiritual communities in and outside of the church.

### **Policy Implications**

The results from the senior pastors wanting to expand digital ministry in the church suggest that churches create clear policies, guidelines, and procedures to govern digital ministry. The digital world can bring about security concerns, privacy infringements, cyberbullying, and misuse or abuse of tools. All churches need to consider this implementation. Doing so ensures that the goals and objectives are met while safeguarding the churchgoers', visitors', and associates' private information. The policy should also include protecting itself against any foreign and domestic cyberattacks. The policy should have how to address these concerns, along with phishing scams that may affect the staff and the churchgoers. Implementing digital policies will be a positive addition to the safety of those who attend church in person or virtually.

### **Education Implications**

Lastly, the results introduced some implications for digital education. The senior pastors shared the lack of technological savviness among the congregation. With the desire to expand digital ministry, education is needed for both staff and churchgoers. As evident by some of these shared statements, SP1, "I literally wanna be able to sit in my office and at the click of a button

be able to reach the World,” SP2, “Took me a minute to get used to it, I’ve adjusted,” SP3, “I haven’t really measured it. But I haven’t taken the time to sit down and measure how effective it has been.” SP7 says, “We just recently started going down the path of live streaming the service.”

Digital educational forums can take place for both the senior pastor and churchgoers. Because the churches do not have the expertise and the resources, it is essential to collaborate with other churches that are thriving in effective digital ministry. Senior pastors are about to share best practices and lessons learned. Connecting with churches that have successfully implemented digital strategies allows senior pastors to share valuable insights into what works and what does not. By knowing what does not work, you minimize, if not eliminate, the pitfalls. Senior pastors can establish brainstorming sessions and discuss how to enhance digital ministry in the church.

Digital education in the church can enhance the power of evangelism. The outreach to the community and digital space will be overwhelming. Equipping the church, as mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-13, will provide the senior pastor and churchgoers for the work of the ministry and unify the faith. Building the capacity of the staff and implementing effective digital ministry is essential to fulfilling the God-given vision and goals of the church.

### **Research Applications**

Given the responses and the research outcome, the application is that senior pastors should embrace digital ministry fully. It should not be second to other implementations in the church. Digital ministry is here to stay. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers to ensure they reach the common goal. Chancellor (2020) mentioned within the

definition that influencing and guiding change is both external and internal. These leaders must create an environment that makes churchgoers comfortable regardless of their worship format.

This research provides in-depth information that senior pastors can apply to their churches.

### **Research Limitations**

The study was limited to ten senior pastors with membership numbers ranging from 15 to no more than 150 in Ohio and Michigan. The churches have had to implement and sustain an active digital ministry since 2019. To ensure consistency, the senior pastors must have been in their lead position at the current church for three or more years. The three years were selected to ensure that the lived experiences gathered included before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

While an invitation was sent to various churches, the researcher only included the first ten pastors who responded. The senior pastors who responded were African American. However, the research eligibility only had been 18 years or older, being the same church's senior pastor for three years, and the membership size, not the ethnic background. Therefore, the study is not limited to the African American community's cultural experiences.

The study limited itself to ten churchgoers the senior pastor identified as having regularly attended church. Regular attendance means that the churchgoer participated in service for at least one day a week and at least three weeks a month. The churchgoer must have been active in the church before, during, and after the pandemic. It was not extended to churchgoers who may visit the selected church during the research period. The senior pastor of that church must be a participant if churchgoers are going to participate. The research did not extend to any additional church officers, but they could be identified as churchgoers.

The research limited itself to the living experiences of those who attended in-person or virtual Sunday morning services. It did not factor in any occasion for attending the church. Various human-made and natural disasters were not considered, such as coastal storms, fires, droughts, floods, earthquakes, dam/levee breaks, etc. However, this study focused exclusively on the most recent COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, this research spanned from January 2019 to October 2023. Doing so provided a timeframe to examine the implementation of digital ministries before, during, and after the pandemic.

### **Further Research**

This research set out to determine the use and outcome of digital ministry in the church, emphasizing its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. Intentionally omitting threats is the fourth component of the SWOT analysis. The research included participants who shared their experiences with digital ministry in person and virtually. The researcher chose to limit this study to smaller churches, and while it was not the intention, the participants attend predominately black churches in the State of Ohio or Michigan. The participants' responses raised perspectives the current research could not delve into because the IRB had already approved the research questions.

For further research, one may want to investigate larger churches. Larger churches have implemented digital ministry and have more resources to purchase necessary equipment; the capacity and bandwidth are present, and there is a greater possibility of having more skilled digital technicians. In addition, future researchers should consider conducting a study group to determine the effectiveness of the implemented digital ministry.

In addition, further research on digital ministry in the church could explore the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities outside of what this study has determined. Regarding strengths,

this study's participants were able to experience digital ministry in person and virtually. Therefore, one could research the effectiveness of digital ministry for those who cannot physically attend church. Regarding weakness, one could examine the risks of digital ministry, for example, privacy concerns, misinformation, and cyberbullying.

A researcher may consider further research based on the researcher's visits to participants' churches' online worship services on platforms like Facebook or YouTube. One could focus on conducting a comparative analysis of online worship services across different churches or denominations. The research could delve into the various approaches, formats, and technologies used and examine their effectiveness in engaging churchgoers and their spiritual growth. Regarding opportunities, one could delve into the possibility of collaboration and partnership with other churches through forms of digital ministry.

Data showed that all participants preferred in-person worship service rather than virtually. For further research, limit the participants to those who prefer virtual worship services. Comparing in-person and virtual preferences could give insight into the experiences of individuals who attend church virtually instead. By focusing specifically on this subset of participants, researchers can delve into the lived experiences of virtual churchgoers and how they navigate the weaknesses and opportunities of digital ministry. This includes their perception of scriptures, Matthew 18:19-20 and Hebrews 10:25, used by this subset of participants to determine why people should attend in person.

Additionally, there was a gap in the research regarding receiving feedback. While the senior pastors mentioned some examples of getting feedback, overall, there was no best practice to accomplish this important need to know. Therefore, this gap suggests that further research could gather data to unfold effective digital ministry feedback mechanisms. Feedback

mechanisms could include, but are not limited to, surveys, online feedback forms, and focus groups. Researchers could explore how churches utilize feedback to assist them in deciding how to implement and improve digital ministry strategies. Ultimately, further research could be instrumental in developing evidence-based practices for evaluating and enhancing the effectiveness of digital ministry in the church.

Also, data that could be used as a best practice for building healthy virtual community relationships was not obtained. For some senior pastors, the virtual community is new, and not enough time has elapsed to see what works and what does not. Further research around the virtual congregations and digital ministry could produce valuable resources that can be used to enhance spiritual formation with people whom senior pastors may never see walk through the physical doors of the church. However, Digital technology gives unmatched opportunities to connect and engage with a large community of Believers and non-believers, hoping they will come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

By researching innovative approaches to digital ministry, researchers can identify effective strategies and resources that will aid in spiritual formation, the building of discipleship, and the promotion of Christian formation with those in the virtual community. Researchers could extend the search by effectively using the different digital platforms that exist, like social media, podcasts, or different apps, to deliver the Good News. With effective ways to use digital ministry and technology, it becomes a powerful method of ensuring spiritual formation continues without regard to geographical boundaries or physical proximity.

Further research can be performed to help foster a robust implementation of digital ministry, including valuable resources, testimonies of those who are affected, financial resources, and educational tools to equip those who are behind the scenes making digital ministry work or



in front receiving and making them knowledgeable of the why digital is necessary to the growth of the spiritual community.

### **Summary**

This research was conducted to determine digital ministry's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities through a qualitative phenomenological study. This dissertation has five chapters. The researcher's research concern is shared in the first chapter, the literature review is in the second chapter, and chapter three details the research methodology. The fourth chapter, Methodological Analysis and Findings, was reserved for the researcher's findings from data analysis. This dissertation ends with chapter five, the conclusion.

The study included 20 participants from Ohio and Michigan. The study was limited to ten senior pastors, who were allowed to participate if they invited a churchgoer to participate. Only the first ten pastors would be accepted to participate. Unfortunately, one senior pastor's interview had to be eliminated because the researcher and the churchgoer could not connect. Therefore, the researcher moved to the next senior pastor, who responded to the invitation. Both sets of participants were required to be leading or attending their current church for three years or more, and the minimum years intentionally included individuals who have consistently led and attended. In addition, this timeframe included the opportunity to hear lived experiences before, during, and after the heightened COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams and Zoom videoconferencing platforms. The participant selected the date and time, and the researcher accommodated each request. The senior pastors were asked 12 open-ended questions, while the churchgoers were asked five open-ended questions. These interview questions were used to gather data to address the four research questions. The research questions were about the four themes that determine

digital ministry in the church, its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. Those four are 1) forms of digital ministry and their effectiveness, 2) advantages and disadvantages of virtual and in-person, 3) plans for and obstacles preventing expansions of digital ministry, and 4) developing healthy virtual community relationships. In addition to themes, subthemes were established.

Digital technology is here to stay. A virtual spiritual community has been formed. As a result of their existence, servant-leaders who are transformational leaders must become knowledgeable about different forms of digital ministry and be willing to make it inclusive of plans on spreading the Word of God rather than an afterthought or reactionary to the next pandemic to the magnitude of COVID-19.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### IRB Approval Letter

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 24, 2023

Willie Garrett  
Thomas Davis

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-109 Digital Ministry in the Church: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities

Dear Willie Garrett, Thomas Davis,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

**For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.**

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification

submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us.

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B

### Study Information Sheet

**Title of the Project:** Digital Ministry in the Church: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities.

**Principal Investigator:** Willie C. Howard Garrett, Doctoral Candidate. John W. Rawlings  
School of Divinity, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be 18 years of age or older and have been the senior pastor of the current church for three or more years. They must have implemented digital ministry before the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants may also be a churchgoer of the same church for three years or more, including pre-COVID, during and post-COVID. They must also have implemented digital ministry in the church for three years. Your membership must be at least 15 but no more than 100 members. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore through research how senior pastors who are servant-leaders, and their churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches as they attempt to develop healthy virtual relationships that maintain personal connections.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a videoconferencing, audio-recorded interview through Microsoft Teams or Zoom that will take no more than one (1) hour.
2. Answer a set of open-ended questions that will be recorded.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include through your lived experience being made aware of the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of digital ministry.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

**The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.**

- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Willie C. Howard Garrett. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Thomas Davis.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515.

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to explore how senior pastors who are servant-leaders and their churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 or older and have been the senior pastor of the current church for three or more years. Participants may also be churchgoers of the same church for three years or more, including pre-COVID, during, and post-COVID. The senior pastor must invite the churchgoer to participate. The church must also have implemented digital ministry for three years, including before, during, and post-COVID. The church must have a membership of 15 but no more than 100 churchgoers. Participants, if willing, will be asked to be interviewed by me through videoconferencing (i.e., Zoom or Microsoft Teams). It should take approximately one (1) hour to complete the interview. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me to schedule an interview.

A study information sheet is attached to this email and will be given to you at the time of the interview. The information sheet contains additional information about my research.

Sincerely,

Willie C. Howard Garrett  
Doctoral Candidate

## Appendix D

### Follow-up Email

Dear Pastor,

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor in Education degree. The title of my research project is Digital Ministry in the Church: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities, and the purpose of my research is to explore how senior pastors who are servant-leaders and their churchgoers perceive the effectiveness, drawbacks, and opportunities of employing digital ministry in their churches.

On [date], you were sent an email inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to contact me if you would like to participate and still need to do so. The deadline for participation is [Date].

Participants must be 18 or older and have been the senior pastor of the current church for three or more years. Participants may also be churchgoers of the same church for three years or more, including pre-COVID, during, and post-COVID. The senior pastor must invite the churchgoer to participate. The church must also have implemented digital ministry for three years, including before, during, and post-COVID. The church must have a membership of 15 but no more than 100 churchgoers. Participants are asked to contact me to schedule an interview that will take up to one (1) hour. To participate, please call me.

A study information sheet is attached to this email and contains additional information about my research.

Sincerely,

Willie C. Howard Garrett  
Doctoral Student



## Appendix E

### Research and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Proposed Interview Questions
<p><b>RQ1.</b> What forms of digital ministry have senior pastors used in their churches, and have they and churchgoers found them effective?</p>	<p>18. We define digital ministry as “using technology for church ministry, including streaming services, social media, blogs, texts and emails, telecommunications, videoconferencing, and church websites.” Considering this definition, which of these forms of digital ministry have you used in your church, and please explain how you are using them?</p> <p>19. There are traditional ways to measure the effectiveness of church ministries, such as attendance, giving, personal anecdotal evidence, etc. Have you determined their efficacy for the digital ministries you have used, and if so, how?</p> <p>20. Please share some stories of digital ministry effectiveness and some things you have tried and have yet to find as effective or even have discontinued.</p>
<p><b>RQ2.</b> What do senior pastors and churchgoers see as advantages and disadvantages of digital ministry compared to in-person ministry?</p>	<p>21. One of the disadvantages of digital ministry could be that it can be impersonal. For instance, someone has compared streaming services to watching a fireplace on television rather than sitting in front of a fire. What do you see as some of the disadvantages of digital ministry?</p> <p>22. Conversely, digital ministry can allow you to reach people who might never attend in person. What advantages</p>

	<p>have you seen in implementing digital ministries?</p> <p>23. Please describe your thoughts and feelings about embracing digital ministry. Are you excited, ambivalent, or concerned about this type of outreach, and why?</p>
<p><b>RQ3.</b> Do senior pastors intend to expand their use of the digital ministry, and if so, are there any obstacles preventing this expansion?</p>	<p>24. Did you change or expand your use of digital ministries due to the COVID pandemic, and if so, please explain what changed.</p> <p>25. Do you plan a future expansion of digital ministries, and if so, which ministries do you hope to expand and why?</p> <p>26. Are any factors hindering you from implementing or expanding digital ministries (such as cost, technological savvy, time factors, etc.)?</p>
<p><b>RQ4.</b> How do senior pastors work to develop healthy virtual community relationships despite the impersonal nature of digital ministry caused by a lack of face-to-face interaction?</p>	<p>27. Have you experienced the impersonal nature of technology, and if so, have you tried anything to reduce or overcome this factor?</p> <p>28. Could digital ministry replace or merely supplement face-to-face personal communication? How do you maintain personal connections with in-person and virtual church members?</p> <p>29. Have you found any tendency towards essentially having two congregations, the face-to-face attendees and your virtual audiences? Please describe your experiences in this regard.</p>
<p><b>Interview Questions for Churchgoers</b></p>	<p>30. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, please share how often you attended regular services and whether they were in-person or virtually.</p> <p>31. During the COVID-19 pandemic, please share how often you attended</p>

	<p>regular services and whether they were in-person or virtually.</p> <p>32. As it relates to now, please share how often you attend regular service and whether it is in-person or virtually.</p> <p>33. Please share your experience with virtual and in-person services.</p> <p>34. If possible, please share one advantage and one disadvantage of attending virtual and in-person worship services.</p>
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